

How to talk to Nicodemus

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Jesus and Nicodemus might as well be speaking different languages. Jesus speaks of birth from above; Nicodemus is befuddled. Jesus speaks of the spirit as wind blowing where it will; Nicodemus wonders how this can be. They are like a creationist and a paleontologist comparing notes on fossils--they simply can't fathom each other. Their organizing assumptions are too different.

Here's when we sense that Nicodemus begins to understand what Jesus is saying: when Jesus reinterprets the story of Israel in the wilderness, drawing from the language that has oriented Nicodemus's life and thought. It doesn't seem likely, after all, that the series of puzzling metaphors Jesus begins with would push Nicodemus to understanding. But something clearly does: the next time we meet Nicodemus, he has taken a soft position of defense for Jesus against the larger Pharisee crowd. Eventually he is one of the people who comes into the light in order to prepare Jesus for burial.

Jesus' linguistic accommodation is not as extreme as Paul's famous one:

To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews... to the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.

Yet it is a movement in that direction, a willingness to use the language of his conversation partner to translate the gospel into something that partner will understand.

How will we translate the language of light and darkness to a culture still clashing along racial lines? And are there episodes in our cultural history--or the history of the churches we serve, or the personal history of our parishioners--that can function like the serpent in the wilderness? Can we recall moments of salvation from God that were wholly unexpected, reversals that were celebrated for generations?

In my first church, it was a story of the church's impending foreclosure during the Great Depression--and the miraculous, unexpected clemency of the bank. It was a turnaround that saved not only a building and a community but thousands of hurting people who have walked into it ever since. It's become part of the language of grace there, and it resonates with the people.

What's the metaphor, what's the language, that can help the next Nicodemus?