

Bush Hill Church Seniors
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA
Youth Sunday – March 22, 2009

Psalm 107
John 3:1–21
Ephesians 2:1–10

SENIOR REFLECTIONS

Gwyneth van Son:

In the gospel of John there is a Pharisee named Nicodemus. He went to speak to Jesus at night. When reading this I wonder why did he go at night? To me, he most likely went at night to keep the other Pharisees from seeing him going to speak with Christ, who was not very high on the Pharisees' list of favorites. This got me thinking about the night time and what makes it special. There is the nighttime fear that the monsters will pop out of my closet and make me scream for my mother—the fear that when I am home alone I will hear the sounds of someone breaking into my house in the middle of the night—and the fear that God will forget my family, friends, and myself in the night. This is why I do the same thing Nicodemus has done, I go looking for Christ. Unlike Nicodemus I do not creep in the shadows until I find the dwelling of Jesus and his followers and ask him important questions about Christianity and faith; I simply ask for help. I ask him to be with my family, friends, and loved ones, those in the world who so desperately need him, which at the end of the day is everyone and those that suffer silently so that no one else has to carry the burden of the load they manage alone. Nicodemus is questioning, but on a deeper level. He asks Christ about how one can be reborn in the spirit, and Christ responds in his confusing way, that always seems to hint at a deeper meaning much like a riddle. Christ talks about how once a person has found salvation he is born again. Nicodemus is only able to see the literal and questions how it is physically possible to be born again. Christ is always trying to get us to look beyond what he says and apply it to our own lives. In this passage, he is telling us how to get into heaven, but we still don't understand until it's spelled out for us. It is thanks to Nicodemus's questioning that the rest of the human race can understand.

This calling on God makes me think of a few weeks ago when I was home alone. My parents were up in Michigan going through my Grandpa's house and preparing it to sell. It was a Thursday night, my mom was already there and my dad had left that morning to drive up there. I had gotten home at around 6:30 p.m. from school and rehearsal, and was faced with an empty house. I was sick, alone, and had to feed myself the cats, and do all my work. It was exhilarating to have the house to myself for five days, but I was scared to death. During the night, I seemed to wake up every two hours. I slept with a light on in the hall, a blue light in my room, a knife by my bed, my covers pulled up to my face, and sweating with fear. It seems funny to look back on because I am an 18-year-old senior getting ready to leave the nest and go off to college by myself, but at the time I wasn't laughing. Every time I woke up I would ask God to keep me safe and not forget about me and my lonesome self, all curled up in fear and anxiety. Thankfully God didn't leave me alone; the night was difficult, but I did not wake up sweating with fear for the rest of the time my parents were away. Why are we afraid of the night? Is it the fact that we can't see very well or because we don't know what could happen in the night? Well, for me it was both. I left lights on so I could see everything, but still I was afraid of what I didn't know—I

didn't know what would happen when my parents were away. I didn't have my two protective parents watching over my safety, so I didn't know what to do.

I can imagine Nicodemus in my situation, shaking with fear about what happens when he dies, thinking to himself, "What if this Jesus, who says he is the son of God, really is who he says he is. After this important question Nicodemus would creep through the night sweating in fear with his tunic pulled tight around him so that no one will see him going to the very man his religious authorities dislike. He would be fraternizing with the enemy. The Pharisees were afraid of Christ because he was threatening their ruling power and because they did not know him. They were afraid of the unknown: Who is this man that can perform miracles and says he is the king of the Jews and son of God? They didn't understand or know him, so they were afraid, much like my fear of the night. I am afraid of the unknown night. They are afraid of the unknown Christ.

After hearing Christ explain that one is saved through being born of the water and the spirit, Nicodemus is comforted to a certain extent, but he is not fully convinced of Jesus and his teaching, he isn't ready to drop everything in his life and join the disciples. When the Pharisees are debating about what to do with Jesus, Nicodemus stands up for him saying he deserves a fair trial just like any other person. It may have been a timid suggestion, but none the less, he said it. After Christ dies Nicodemus brings a ridiculous amount of perfume to anoint Christ's body. He puts himself on the track to trust in Christ, but takes baby steps along the way.

I decided that I would put my faith completely in God. If someone should break into my house when I was alone, then I know that God would be there to help me get over it and pull my life together. If he kept me safe throughout the night, I would be grateful. It is just like God's gift of grace; he decides to give it to us, so we should be grateful, even when life is hard we still have that gift and the giver who only wants to help. Even though there are times in my life when I am angry with God, or I just don't understand what is going on, I still know that he is there. I see his strength everyday through people helping others, leaders trying to do the best thing for their people and my parents who try so very hard to make their children all that we can be. I see all of this every day, but what I decide to focus on are the few times that something bad happens. Nicodemus was living his life in the dark, Jesus and his teachings were like the night to Nicodemus; he was afraid and did not understand them. Yet he made a leap to go and talk to Christ and try to understand that one conversation is what turned Christ from the night into a light in Nicodemus's life. It started out small, but through his baby steps on the journey of faith, that light grew. Even if my leap was simply trusting that God would watch over me, it was still important. I let God take me down the path he decided on the same way Nicodemus did. Even if the leap seems small, it is still just part of the greater journey. God is waiting patiently for us all to take a leap; he is waiting there with his arms open to catch us if we would just jump.

Amen.

Libby Ryan:

When I was first told I had the option of writing a sermon for today, my initial thought was, "Oh goodness ... How am I going to do this?"

But then I thought, "This is just something new that I need to believe in myself that I can do."

It's the same whenever I go into a new situation. I believe it's going to be okay, and I'll make the best of it, no matter what.

From the passages I read for today, one point really stood out to me: believing in the unknown. Today in high school, many different aspects of your life influence you. Your parents are telling you one thing while your friends have an opinion, also.

So, how do you believe in what you can't see? Children can believe so easily in things they can't see and only hear about, while some adults struggle with believing in what they can't see.

How come once you get older you can't just have faith in what you believe? Why are you so easily influenced and so constantly second guessing yourself? How can you be so sure there is a God if you can't see him yourself?

It's like when Jesus answered Nicodemus saying, "You can hear the wind but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going." This is the same with our faith. You know you have it, but you don't have an exact explanation for where it came from or where it may take you in the future. You just have to believe in the unknown.

It's the same with God's love. How do you know it is present in your life? It's a matter of believing in what you are unsure of. It's the same for loving and trusting someone else. How can you love someone when you can't actually see love itself?

Through actions and words, their love and trust is proven to you; and therefore, you believe in the unknown. Believing in the unknown is hard to accept, but through faith, trust, and love, it becomes easier to trust, and you know through what you've learned that you can believe.

Amen.

Rachel Huggins:

Whenever I hear the word "gifts," Christmas comes to mind. Some of the best gifts I've ever received came on December 25th. My favorites are as follows:

- 1998 – I got a toy cash register.
- 2000 – I got a Razor Scooter
- 2001 – the gift of a Disney cruise with the Kilcoyne family
- 2003 – a golden retriever named Ginger.
- 2004 – an iPod.
- and, in 2008 – Changing color pig night light.

Some more important gifts that are associated with Christmas are the gifts of Jesus Christ and the gifts that were brought to Jesus: Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh. These gifts are all amazing.

One of the best gifts ever given was God's grace. God is what "saved a wretch like me." But not just me—all of us are saved by God's grace. None of us deserve this gift. It is never ending and allows us to have eternal life with God.

Throughout my faith journey I have been out of touch with God - biblically speaking, spiritually dead. But I was pulled out of the ashes and brought back to life. It was God's grace that saved me.

In elementary school, there was a period of time when I did not enjoy church—just like I didn't enjoy taking showers. As I have grown up, I have become closer to God: attending church regularly, attending Bible study, teaching Bible study, praying, and I have built my trust in God. (If you're wondering, I also enjoy taking showers now.)

I know that God saw my little lost soul and pulled me back through his mercy, love, and grace. I now harness these gifts, and God harnessed me to be a great servant. What I mean by this is that I reach out to those who are struggling in their faith journey. I do this all the time: at Bible study, encouraging others to attend; and even at school. I have started to notice that when I hear my teachers talking at school, I relate it to a Bible verse or passage and try to teach others who are doing wrong to do right.

My great savior in life was my confirmation mentor back in the seventh grade. Her name was Miss Ann Lester. She made me realize the importance of living for God as he lives through you. I cherished our time together even when I was writing my extremely long statement of faith.

But God worked through her and saved me with his grace. Many have the misconception that people are saved by their works, though. Often you hear, "That was such a nice thing; you're going to heaven."

But this is not completely true. With God's grace you are enabled to help others and reach out. So the gift of grace is what saves you, that allows you to do wonderful things for others. If you are reaching out, it is a sign of the presence of God's grace and you are saved. This gift is so amazing, so use it wisely.

Amen.

David Wilson – A Sermon for the Ages:

Two weeks ago at youth group, Jen presented to the seniors the task of writing a mini-sermon for youth Sunday. Two weeks is a lot of time to prepare, so naturally I was up till midnight last night trying to write this. Forgive me if my jokes aren't up to their normal standard. That said, let's get right into this.

So last weekend, I had a DECA competition. DECA is like the marketing club at Hayfield. Anyway, it was a state competition; and if you placed, you went to Nationals, which are being held in Anaheim, California. As soon as I heard my category get called, I immediately began praying rapidly. My name wasn't called, so my hopes and dreams of hanging out with my boy Mickey Mouse were dashed away. But on the long bus ride back from Norfolk, I began to reflect on that moment. The arena where the awards ceremony was being held was dark, with the exception of the stage and wherever the spotlights happened to be shining. I thought it was kind of strange, how I always pray when it's dark, or in dimmed areas, and then I thought, that's what most people do. Is it a coincidence that most people pray at night or in their darkest hours (or maybe just before a big exam) for help from above, and that Jesus is our light?

I think that we overlook the importance of darkness in our religion. So many significant biblical events happened at night. Some quick examples: Daniel had to spend a night in a Lion's den. Jesus was born and betrayed at night. However, one example I'd like to talk about is Nicodemus. Now, you may not have heard of this guy. He isn't exactly a big biblical name, and he only

makes three major appearances in the gospels. In the first, he asks Jesus some questions, and isn't impressed with him much. However, he starts to turn, and the second time we hear of him, Jesus is going to go on trial for acting as a false prophet. He suggests that Jesus should get a fair trial to the other Pharisees, and they look at him like most people look at me when I say I'm a Pittsburgh Steelers fan. Off topic for a second, you know, I think you can compare the Washington Redskins to God. They have a grand scheme in store, but you never know when it'll actually start working. Anyway, they think he's crazy, and he basically shrugs it off like "never mind." But his third appearance is probably his most significant. Jesus is dead, and they are preparing to bury him. Nicodemus shows up with not 1 bottle, not 2 bottles, but 75 pounds worth of perfume. Now if you aren't quite sure how much that is, allow me to try and put that into perspective. How many parents here have raised or are currently raising a teenage boy? Ok, let's assume that he uses about 1 ounce of Axe per week. Multiply that by 16 and you've got a high school gym locker room. Multiply that by 75 and you've got roughly what Nicodemus brought to Jesus in one day. A whole week's worth of Axe for an entire locker room in one moment. Makes you dizzy just thinking about it, doesn't it?

Nicodemus's first appearance was at night. Why was this? Was he having questions about his faith and did not want to be seen until he was certain? Was he hanging out with all the other Pharisees? Whatever the reason, I think we can relate to Nicodemus. He was questioning himself, as we do all the time, and he came through in the end, as we all hope to do. While Jesus set the standard for future Christians, Nicodemus is more of a person that we can relate to. It's important to note that while to you all, Nicodemus will now be known as the guy with all the perfume, we shouldn't recognize him purely on his works. God doesn't do that with us, so we shouldn't do it for him. When it all comes down to it in the end, God judges us based on our faith in him and his son, and the Holy Spirit. He treats us equally whether we deserve praise for our good actions and/or punishment for our sins. As Nicodemus showed us, his faith is what made him famous in the end.

Casey Kilcoyne:

When I was in elementary school, I didn't like going to church. Sunday School was awful—I didn't have many friends, and it felt like torture. I usually didn't pay attention to the lesson or the worship service; instead, I would daydream. Oh, I believed in God, and I knew God was good. However, I believed that God's purpose was to make everything good; but when things went bad, I didn't understand where God was. My dog Katie died when I was in first grade. I couldn't understand why God took Katie from my family. God was supposed to make everything good. I had many questions but I didn't ask anybody. Not my parents, not my Sunday School teacher; but most importantly, not God. I never prayed, not even when I was scared or had a big test. Just like Nicodemus, when he first comes to Jesus at night, I had lots of questions. But unlike Nicodemus, I stayed in the darkness and didn't ask.

The first time I really remember praying was the summer of 2007, when my mom and I were in Switzerland. We had gone to a Girl Scout World Center, where one of the activities was rappelling into a gorge. It was probably one of the scariest things I've done in my life. There were two drops, the first being shorter than the second. My mom was the first one to go, and I was the second. As I was getting strapped in and preparing myself to head down, I started to freak out.

I cried the whole way down. I knew that I wasn't going to be able to do the second one. I started crying to my mom and scaring myself even more. But my mom just told me to pray and know that God would be with me the whole way down. So I prayed that I would get down safely with no fear or worries. The whole way down, I laughed, and felt completely accomplished that I had done something that crazy. At the time, I didn't really give much credit to my praying; but that night, looking back on the day, I realized that I didn't really do that by myself.

The second time we hear of Nicodemus in the Gospel of John, he defends why Jesus was not arrested while he was with other Pharisees. Though it is not an outright defense for Jesus, it is a defense for cases like his. Though I've never really felt the need or strong desire to defend my faith to others, I think there have been times when I could have had the chance, I just haven't had that strong of feelings about it.

Writing this sermon was probably one of the hardest things for me to do. I've been dreading this moment since coming here, because I've never really felt all that comfortable in my faith. I think that this point—giving my sermon—in my own faith journey is almost like the point in Nicodemus' journey where he brings the overabundance of things for Jesus' burial. This is the third and last time we hear of Nicodemus in the Bible, and it is here where I believe he is professing his faith and belief that Jesus was God's son—God on Earth—by bringing an overabundance of aloe and myrrh to Jesus' tomb. By speaking to you today, this is my equivalent of Nicodemus' overabundance.

Because we only know three stories about Nicodemus, it seems like his faith over time just got stronger and stronger. But I don't think this kind of journey is necessarily true for everyone. I know that in my own faith journey, and, I'm sure, many of your own, there have been peaks and valleys. I started off just where Nicodemus did: in the dark. But from there, I went directly to Nicodemus' overabundance and confession of faith. I know that after my strong relationship with God while in Switzerland, I did not keep that relationship up. I can't remember if there was an event that occurred to cause that drifting away from God or if it just happened, but I know it did. Since then, I've had plenty of ups and downs in God and my relationship due to different events or feelings. Just like human relationships, there are times when an action or event will affect your faith in someone else, and I believe this is true with God. But even though we may not have kept up our side of the relationship, God will still be there waiting for us. He treats us much differently than any human would ever treat us because He is merciful and has given us this gift of grace. But from both the Bible and experience, we've learned that because of God's gift of grace and never-ending love, no matter the relationship that you have with Him, He will always be with you and love you.

Amen.