



“The Night Shift”  
John 3:1-8  
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I recently came across some guidelines for surviving a horror movie. If you ever find yourself a character in a horror movie, the following tips might help keep your character stay alive until the closing credits.

- Do not search the basement. Ever.
- If appliances start operating by themselves, move out of your house.
- If your companions suddenly begin to exhibit behavior such as hissing, glowing eyes, increasing hairiness, get away from them as fast as possible.
- Avoid the following geographical locations: Amityville, Elm Street, Transylvania, lover’s lanes, abandoned asylums, carnivals and fairgrounds, secluded mountain resorts, and all small towns in the state of Maine. In fact, you might want to avoid New England altogether.
- Beware of strangers bearing tools such as chainsaws, staple guns, hedge trimmers, electric carving knives, lawnmowers, butane torches, and band saws.
- For the love of God, turn on the lights!

In my opinion, this list is unnecessarily complicated. I have some simple advice. Don’t go out at night. All the bad stuff in horror movies happens at night.

The daytime is much safer. You can see the shape of things, and you can feel the warmth of the sun. Good things happen in the light of day.

The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus happens at night. In the dark. It gives the whole encounter a furtive, not altogether above-board quality. For Nicodemus, there is safety in the darkness. Protection. Evidently, his curiosity about Jesus is not shared by his peers. So, he visits Jesus in the cover of darkness. At night, a person can slip in and out of places undetected and unnoticed.

Nighttime has its advantages. God does some of God’s best work at night. When is Jesus born? At night. When is Jesus raised from the dead? Hard to say with absolute certainty, but most likely at night. Certainly, in the darkness of the tomb.

Many years ago, I experienced an Easter vigil service in Greece. The service began close to midnight the night before Easter. The church was an underground grotto, a cave filled with candles and incense, tapestries, and icons. As midnight approached, the church grew darker and darker until it was pitch black. Then I heard the words. They were spoken in a different language, but I knew what they were saying. "Christ is risen." A single candle was lit. "Christ is risen." Then, each person lit their candle from the Christ candle. Soon the cave was full of smiling, laughing faces lit by candlelight. Then, everyone took their light out into the darkness. "Christ is risen!" they shouted. I was a young adult at the time and that nighttime experience forever shaped my understanding of the relationship between darkness and hope.

Back to the story of Nicodemus. In the cover of darkness, he and Jesus have quite a conversation. One that has shaped the history of Christianity in ways complex and profound. The content of that conversation is for another sermon for another day. The good news that I want to share this morning is:

We have a savior who keeps evening hours. Our God works the night shift.

Back in the pre-streaming days, I was channel surfing and watched a few minutes of an old science fiction movie. Evil invaders from space somehow managed to block the sun. The earth and its inhabitants are living in perpetual darkness. Plants are dying. Chaos reigns. The people are disoriented and afraid.

There are seasons in our lives where it seems as though that plotline is real. When things keep happening – bad things – hard things – puzzling things and – if the sun does rise in the morning – we cannot feel its warmth. If you find yourself in such a time, remember.

We have a savior who keeps evening hours. Our God works the night shift.

We are in the midst of a seemingly endless midwestern winter. Long nights. Short days. Very little sunshine. We had a few days this past week of sunshine and temperatures that climbed into the 60's. We were downright giddy! But don't be fooled. Winter is not over.

In this county, we are in the middle of a long night, a seemingly endless night of division and polarization. On Saturday we arose to news that I have only begun to process. I fear what awaits us. It's as though the sun has disappeared from our shared civic life. Thank goodness,

We have a savior who keeps evening hours. Our God works the night shift.

Maybe you are someone who likes to encounter God in the light of day – in the wash of the noonday sun. Maybe you like your conversations with God well lit. Maybe you prefer to encounter God when you are your daytime you.

In my experience, the daytime me does not have all that much time for God. All day I can pretend that something is true that is not. I'm just fine. Things are good. All is well. Nighttime is a different story. No one is watching. My guard is down. I'm not so pulled together. When the lights go off, I can't pretend any longer. In the darkness, it's just me and God and I cannot lie to God. There is no hiding in the dark.

Nighttime has its moments. Nicodemus is often criticized for seeing Jesus at night. He must have been afraid to see him in the daylight – afraid of what others might think, afraid of being labeled a follower of Jesus. But maybe Nicodemus knows something important – that nighttime is often the best time to encounter God.

If we only read chapter three, we don't know learn anything of how this encounter with Jesus changes Nicodemus. But if we read ahead, to chapter nineteen, we discover more about Nicodemus. At this point in the story, Jesus has been arrested and convicted and sentenced. Jesus is dead. Nicodemus steps forward and helps do the work of burial preparation. Nicodemus provides the expensive spices used in this important ritual.

It's an extraordinary thing that Nicodemus does. It's an act of respect and devotion. It's a bold public act. It is not the action of a man who is afraid. Nicodemus has been changed because of his encounter in the night.

I don't know if the sun is shining for you right now. I hope it is. But I'll tell you this: if this day happens to find you not well, not fine, in the dark, at twilight, toward midnight – that's O.K.

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More than that – in the darkness we discover things about ourselves and about God that are inaccessible to us in the bright light of day. In the nighttime – the dark, hard times that life brings – God offers us that which we most need: God's power and presence and love. And a little bit of light.

We need a little bit of light. Even with that light, in the fog of winter, in the darkness of the tomb, we can't see that far ahead. Maybe three feet or so. That's not much.

That's enough. That's enough. That's enough.

Amen.