

Under the Milkyway was by far one of the best one hit wonder songs from the late 80's. It is a beautiful yet haunting song, that tells the story of a deep **spiritual yearning** that exists both in the writer and in the people he is writing about.

The writer, Steve Kilbey, used to frequent a music venue and cultural center in Amsterdam called the **Milkweg**, which is Dutch for Milky Way. The song reflects his observations there. He thinks about the **loveless fascination** people have with the venue.

It expresses a yearning to be part of a creative community, yet without any real **bond of love**, something crucial to human relationships.

In the second verse, he talks about **the curtain being lowered**. This refers to the time the entertainment stops, but people still linger about. Perhaps now that they are no longer being distracted by entertainment, they can reflect on their own **spiritual longings**. They look for answers to

life's tough questions. They seek out further counsel from the **wise men and sages** that just entertained them.

But the writer has **no time for private consultation**. Perhaps he, like those he just sang to, is a fellow **truth seeker** who has no real answers yet. Just a blind man leading other blind men.

Part of the problem, as the chorus recognizes, is that none of them know **what they are really looking for**. If they did, then they **might know what they would find**.

It's a pretty **hopeless situation**, and one of the reasons the song was **so successful** is because so many people could **identify** with it.

Have any of you ever felt that way? Like you were looking for something **more to life**, but you didn't quite know what it was? I know I have felt that way.

The problem is, where do we turn for answers? Especially when those whom we hope will have the answers are **just as lost?**

Today's story is about a **spiritual leader** in the first century named Nicodemus. People often hung on his every word, just like the **amorous fans at the Milkweg** hung on every word of the artists they so admired. Yet Nicodemus didn't know what people were **really looking for**; partly because he didn't know what **he** was looking for.

That all changed during an encounter he had, **under the Milky Way**, with a man named Jesus Christ.

With that in mind, I'd like to invite us to look at God's word, and be attentive as we hear about this encounter under the Milky Way.

3 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a

teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.”³ Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”⁴ Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”⁵ Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”
¹⁰ Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do

not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

The word of the Lord from John Chapter 3. **Thanks be to God.** Let's pray.

Lord, we come before you today a lost and confused bunch of people. Some of us have experienced times where we thought we knew all the answers to life's big questions, but now we are unsure. Some of us don't even know if there are answers out there, but we are at least

willing to **try** and seek them out. And some of us don't even know **why** we are here. But we **are** here. Reveal yourself to us, Oh God, and make us all restless, until we find our rest in you. This we pray in the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, AMEN.

What we read today comes from the gospel of John, a book in the New Testament that tells us the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Throughout this gospel we read of many encounters with Jesus, and how that drastically affected the lives of everyone involved.

Today we read about a man named Nicodemus who came to Jesus **by night** to ask him some questions. And his life would never be the same.

A Pharisee

We know from today's text that Nicodemus was part of a Jewish group called the Pharisees. In Jesus' world, a Pharisee was a religious leader who paid extra attention to the Law of God. For them, being Jewish made you a member of God's family, but that was a **privilege** you

could lose. If you wanted to **remain** in God's family, you needed to live a life of **strict obedience** to God's laws.

In this regard, they were similar to many Christian groups **today** that think if you commit **certain** sins, you will fall out of favor with God and no longer be a member of His family. Today, you will get different counsel concerning sin depending on which group you go to for advice and direction.

It was no different in the time of Jesus.

One of the main groups people would go to for instruction were the Pharisees. They created an **entire system** for understanding, interpreting, and obeying God's Law.

Sometimes, they were so afraid of **breaking a law**, they would create a law that would prevent them from accidentally breaking a law. This was known as **building a fence around the law**. For example, the Law of God clearly said not to **work** on the sabbath. But it didn't **define** work.

So the Pharisees would **build a fence around the law** by listing all the things that they considered **work** that could not be done on the sabbath. **Healing people** was one of these forbidden things. That's why in John Chapter 5, as well as elsewhere, Jesus gets in trouble for performing miracles on the sabbath.

The issue isn't so much about **breaking** the law of God, as it is about **possibly** breaking the law of God.

I'll give you a contemporary example of this.

Many Christian groups prohibit any kind of **dancing**. Why is that? There is not a single biblical law that forbids dancing.

I bring this up because the **reason** *some* groups forbid dancing is because dancing leads to what?

(I know some of you have heard this before).

Pregnancy before marriage! Anyone here ever hear that before? And that is the result of sexual immorality which is a sin. So what is the best way to ensure our children never

break the **sexual immorality** laws? Build a fence around the law, and forbid dancing.

This is what the Pharisees did.

And the Jews, who desperately wanted to make sure they were **properly following** God, flocked to the Pharisees.

By the time of Jesus, they had become very powerful religious leaders. And Nicodemus was one of them.

So in today's story, he comes to Jesus by night, **under the milky way**, to talk to him.

This is significant. The night time meeting suggests that he intended it to be a secretive meeting. Why would that be?

Perhaps Nicodemus knew that meeting with Jesus would be considered scandalous amongst his fellow Pharisees. Perhaps he didn't want them to know that he was seeking out answers to some **deep felt needs** that his Pharisaic beliefs were not addressing.

We've all been there before, haven't we? We have all had those moments of **questioning** when we weren't sure if

what we believed about **reality** really dealt with our deepest needs.

Now imagine that you are a **professional counselor** of some sort. Imagine that you have hundreds of clients who hang on your every word. Now imagine what it would be like if you didn't have any faith in the answers you gave your clients, because you didn't think it would really address their needs, because whatever answers you have didn't address your own needs.

Perhaps that is where Nicodemus was coming from. And he didn't want others to know it. That could be disastrous for his career as a Pharisee! It would be like me being a **pastor and an atheist** at the same time.

Most of you would probably not want to hear what **I have to say** about religious things, if I don't believe them myself.

Perhaps Nicodemus could relate to the lyrics of Under the Milky Way.

Wish I knew what you were looking for/ Might have known what you would find.

Perhaps he didn't know what his followers were really looking for in life, because he didn't really know what **he** was looking for in life. Perhaps, like the song says, he had no time, after the teaching was done, for **private consultation**, because he was afraid they would find out the **truth** about him.

Perhaps building a **fence around the law** is not what they needed to find, and perhaps this Jesus had some **answers** for him.

The Scandal of Jesus

When Nicodemus first talks to Jesus, he says this. "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him."

He calls Jesus **Rabbi**, which is a way of recognizing him as a **legitimate** religious teacher.

He says “We know”, which suggests that Nicodemus is one of **many other** religious leaders watching Jesus. It could be that Nicodemus sought Jesus to see if He could answer his most heart-felt questions, but it could **also be** that he is there on behalf of other leaders to spy on Jesus. To see what He is really about, and report back to them.

He also makes reference to the **signs** Jesus performed, which means that by now, word had spread that Jesus performed miracles.

The **scandal** begins in verse three however. Jesus responds to Nicodemus by making a statement that turns his world **upside down**.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” This statement drives a wedge right in the heart of Nicodemus’ Phariseeism.

You see, the Pharisees believed that through **obedience to the Law**, they could create or maintain a special

relationship with the Kingdom of God. Jesus doesn't dispense with any formalities here. He cuts right to the chase.

“What you believe is wrong! You can not even **see** the Kingdom of God unless something is first done **to** you. Nothing **you do** will allow you to see the kingdom of God.” And what is it that must be done to you? “You must be born again!”

Now at this point, Nicodemus could be like, *Blasphemy! I'm not going to listen to any more of this garbage...and just walk away.* But he doesn't. He asks Jesus more questions. This suggests that he wants to learn from him. It also suggests that perhaps, deep down, Nicodemus knows that he **does not know what he is really looking for**. If he wants to help others on their spiritual quests, he needs to first find some answers himself.

Han Solo

I think here, of course, of **Han Solo in Star Wars a New Hope**. When we are first introduced to him, he doesn't

believe in **the Force**, in fact he mocks those who do believe in it.

And yet, he watches and listens to those who do believe in the Force. And just before the battle against the first Death Star, what are his parting words to Luke Skywalker? ***May the Force be with You!***

I think this suggests that Han Solo, the scoundrel and smuggler who doesn't care about anything but himself, has started to **question** his own worldview and consider the ways of the Force. A little later, he ends up putting his **life and future** in jeopardy as he flies in to rescue the day and save Luke. In so doing, Luke is able to destroy the Death Star, and the Rebellion is saved. All because Han Solo wasn't afraid to seek out some answers and reconsider what he believed.

And that is what it appears Nicodemus is doing. He is **questioning his own worldview**. What if my obedience to the law will not save me? What if I need to find my hope and identity **elsewhere?**

But does all this stuff about being **born again** make any sense? It seems to confuse Nicodemus a little. “How can a person experience physical birth twice” Nicodemus’ reply suggests.

The reason for this confusion is linguistic, and we don’t necessarily catch it in our English translations, unless we know what was said in the original **Greek** writings.

Anothen

Jesus, responding to Nicodemus in Greek, says you must be born ***anothen***, which in Greek has several possible meanings. It can mean again, but it can also mean ***from above***. Often times in ancient literature, words with **multiple meanings** were used, not to be ambiguous, but in order to convey multiple concepts at once. This is one of those instances.

Jesus had in mind ***all the meanings*** at the same time.

He **did mean** to say that a person needed to experience a new birth, but it was **spiritual** new birth. Literally, a birth from above, or from God. And Jesus clarifies this in verses

five through eight. But it is a scandalous clarification for Nicodemus.

In verse five, Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

By saying ***Truly Truly I say to you***, Jesus is in effect saying He is speaking prophetically **on behalf of God**. Nicodemus would have understood this.

The reference to water here would resonate quite deeply with anyone that had knowledge of Jesus turning water in to wine. And Nicodemus probably knew about this recent miracle.

The water in view was the Jewish **Mikveh water**, or living water, that would make a person pure in light of the Jewish religious law that Nicodemus so cherished. Jesus was further establishing himself as the ultimate personification of these living waters.

Scandalous! *The old system was passing away.* Could Jesus actually be saying that God was doing things **differently** now, through Jesus?

And the reference to **spirit** here further emphasized the spiritual nature of being born again, which becomes even more clear in verse six.

That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

This would have challenged Nicodemus beliefs to their **very core**. Remember, as a Pharisee, he believed that **obedience to the law** gained us favor with God. If we wanted to be right with God, **obey His law**. If we wanted spiritual birth or renewal, obey God's law.

Jesus turned this on its head, and essentially said, "Nope. Your righteousness will **not** get you in to the Kingdom of God. Only if you are born from above by the spirit of God will you see God's Kingdom."

Then, as if Jesus anticipated that Nicodemus would be **blown away** by this concept, he says this:

7 Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

These words would have been a **huge challenge** for Nicodemus, but they are probably equally a challenge for all of us here today. By making this connection to the spirit and the wind, Jesus taught that the **spirit, like the wind**, blows wherever it chooses.

It is not something **we can manipulate**. Pertaining to being born from above, we don't have the ability to force the spirit's hand and say "I am ready to be born now" or "I am not ready to be born now". The Spirit determines the process, and the Spirit determines whom it will give birth to.

Does that make you **uncomfortable**? I'll be honest. As I tried to figure out how I was going to preach on this, it certainly made **me** feel uncomfortable. This is challenging stuff!

As Americans, we like to elevate the role **our choices** play in our lives. But what if some of our choices are made by forces beyond our control? Especially spiritual forces? That's not something we particularly like to hear.

Well, as challenging as that might be for you, imagine how challenging it was for Nicodemus, whose entire **life and livelihood** was based around making the right choices, and teaching others how to make the right choices. And yet, Nicodemus continued to interact with Jesus. The only explanation for this I can think of is that God's Spirit must have been at work **on his heart**.

Let's look at the song **Under the Milky Way** again. The last verse is haunting yet hopeful. And I think it speaks well of Nicodemus at this point.

*And it's something quite peculiar
Something shimmering
and white. Leads you here despite your destination
Under the Milky Way tonight*

Could it be that something **peculiar**, something **shimmering and white**, has led Nicodemus to be with

Jesus? Perhaps this is a poetic description of what he sees in Jesus. Something shimmering and white.

That is language Nicodemus would have been familiar with. It is the language used to describe the **Ancient of Days** and the **Son of Man** in the **Book of Daniel**. It is symbolic language used to describe the great **messianic figure** that would usher in the Kingdom of God here on earth. Perhaps Nicodemus was drawn to Jesus, because deep down, he knew, somehow, that Jesus might be **that very messiah**.

In verse 13, Jesus implies that He **is** that Son of Man.

If that's true, then perhaps his words about being **born from above** are also true.

Perhaps the very reason Nicodemus was being drawn to Jesus was because **the Spirit of God** was drawing him to Jesus.

Law and Gospel

So why would this need to be the case? Why would the **Spirit** need to draw someone like Nicodemus? And why all the scandal?

The Pharisees believed that you could **gain God's favor** by obeying the law. In order to make sure you obeyed the law, they **fenced the table** around the law. In other words, they created even more laws you needed to follow in order to ensure you followed the law.

The problem with this belief system, is that it makes the law **too heavy of a burden** for people to carry. **No one can do it.** Do you remember the creative way we use to remember what **Pharisee** means?

The Pharisee's view of the law wasn't very **fair you see.** No one could live up to their standards.

Listen to these words from Psalms 14 and 53. These were written by King David, who knew a thing or two about mankind's **inability** to fully obey God's laws. Here is what he said:

The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one.

Not terribly flattering. But he didn't just say this about everyone **else** in the world. He said it about **himself**. He recognized that as much as he **loved** the law of God, he could not obey it perfectly.

No one can.

And as a result, no one can, **or will**, seek after after God. Again, not terribly flattering. I recognize that. But this is why the **Spirit of God** is so essential.

Friends, if no one will seek after God, then the only way someone will **seek God** is if God's Spirit **draws them**.

This must have **torn Nicodemus up** inside. He was a man who believed he was seeking after God through following all these rules and regulations. And he taught

other people the same thing. And yet deep down, he knew this was a hollow pursuit. He knew he could never fully obey the law. He knew he needed something more.

He just didn't know **what** he was looking for.

Until he encountered Jesus **under the Milky Way**.

Now, for the first time, he must have begun to realize that the law he loved so much served a different purpose than he had thought. It existed to show him what he was **really** looking for.

The Son of Man. The Ancient of Days. Jesus Christ, God's Son, the Incarnation. God in the flesh. God standing right before him at this very moment. A few years later, a **former Pharisee** named Paul would write something similar in his letter to the Galatians.

He would tell them that the law of God existed to show us **our need** for Jesus Christ! (Galatians 3:24).

What thoughts passed through Nicodemus' mind at this point? Could these words be true? If so it was scandalous.

He needed to rethink and reformulate everything he believed as a Pharisee. What would his friends, family, and students think? What would his fellow Pharisees think? But could it be true? And if so, then wouldn't such a scandal be worth it?

Les Miserables

I think here of the story **Les Miserables**, which takes place during the French Revolution. There are two main characters. **Jean Valjean**, a man who had been imprisoned for stealing a loaf of bread, and **Javert**, the officer of the law responsible for hunting down Valjean after he tries to make a new life for himself.

For Javert, the law is everything. It doesn't matter why Valjean broke the law; he broke the law and must be punished. Javert's identity is completely wrapped up in obeying and enforcing the law.

Near the end of the story, Valjean has the opportunity to kill Javert, thus putting an end to his relentless pursuit, but he instead **lets him go free**. Javert responds to this act of

grace by letting Valjean go free as well. For the first time in his life, Javert finds himself in a situation where he knows that obeying the law would be immoral. He recognizes that there is a law **greater than** the law he has lived by.

Unfortunately, this places him in a terrible **conundrum**. He has made a choice that contradicts all he has believed, lived by, and taught others his entire life. Life as he knows it no longer has meaning. Unable to deal with this great angst, he ends his life by jumping in to the **Seine river**.

Fortunately, when Nicodemus is confronted by the possibility of a law **greater than** the law he has served, he doesn't commit suicide. But **life as he has known it** does end.

We find out later in the gospels that Nicodemus becomes a committed follower of Christ, and he ends up playing a valuable role in the life of the early church. His **encounter under the Milky Way** changes him forever.

No matter where you may be on your own spiritual journeys, I encourage you to **consider** how these truths

might **change your life forever** as well. The Spirit of God is present here, today, and He will testify to you that these things are true. This is not just something that worked for folks 2000 years ago. The Holy Spirit is very much a present reality, changing and **transforming lives** as the words of God are proclaimed.

Let me close with this. I often say that in order to grow in our understanding of God's grace, we need to regularly expose ourselves to the **word and sacraments**. This is not a legalistic statement that a **Pharisee** might say. It does not involve **working** to earn favor with God.

The word and sacraments should instead be regular reminders to us of ***all that Christ has done for us***. And we need these things, because, as I stated earlier, our natural propensity is to be drawn towards **works based** righteousness. But when we partake of the bread and wine, or see the water of baptism, we are reminded of what Christ has done for us, and of our need to be **born from above**, by water and spirit. May that change **our lives** as radically as it changed Nicodemus.

Let's pray.

Gracious God, May your Holy Spirit continually change and transform all of us, and empower us to live lives that would bring glory to yourself, and draw others to you as well. We pray this in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Questions:

Can you give us an example of a law of God that is hard to understand?

Deuteronomy 21. Stoning a disobedient child.

What's so bad about a religious system that shows you how to earn the universe's favor? (Karma, Islam, Judaism)

Why fix anything? Breaking cosmic law by helping earthquake victims.

Han Solo and the Force, Les Miserables (pronounced “Lay Miz-er-ahb”), Under the Milky Way by The Church.

Have you ever felt like you were looking for something **more to life**, but you didn’t quite know what it was? Ever seek answers from others, only to find out they are just as lost and confused as you?