



**“SKEPTICS AND SCARCITY”**  
**SCRIPTURE: GENESIS 12: 1-4a; JOHN 3: 1-17**  
**GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC**  
**March 8, 2020**  
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**Genesis 12:1-4a**

12:1 Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.

12:2 I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.

12:3 I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

12:4a So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him.

The Word of the LORD.

**Thanks be to God.**

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**John 3:1-17**

3:1 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.

3:2 He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

3:3 Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

3:4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

3:5 Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.

3:6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.

3:7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'

3:8 The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not

know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

3:9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"

3:10 Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

3:11 "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony.

3:12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?"

3:13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

3:14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

3:15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

3:17 "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

The Word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

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It's a sunny day in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1995, and McArthur Wheeler feels good about his plan.<sup>1</sup> He's 44 years old and he's done his research. He's ready and he's confident that he will succeed. Wheeler, a larger than average man, walks into two Pittsburgh banks in the middle of the day with no mask, with nothing to obscure his appearance and robs them one after the other. Surveillance cameras caught him smiling on his way out the door in both banks.

Soon after the robberies, the security camera tapes are played on local television. The police quickly get a tip and arrest Wheeler at his home. At the police station they show him the video of his robberies and Wheeler can't believe what he sees.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://qz.com/992127/studies-find-high-achievers-underestimate-their-talents-while-underachievers-overestimate-theirs/>

“How can this be?” he says. “I wore the juice.”

Lemon juice that is. You see McArthur Wheeler had deduced that since lemon juice is used to create invisible ink, he could put it on his face to make himself invisible. He even tested it by taking a picture of himself with the Polaroid camera. For some unknown and fateful reason, the camera produced blank pictures. So Wheeler was sure his plan to rob the banks with an invisible face was full proof.

Alas, not only did his plan epically fail, but also he became the case in point for a scientific theory called the Dunning-Kruger Effect, that is that human beings do not excel at accurate self-assessment. In fact, study after study shows that students who score in the lowest portion of a class on a test, vastly over estimate their performance. And, those students who score the highest tend to underestimate their performance.

Either way we often fail to accurately assess ourselves and our abilities.

There are other theories that get at the limits of our self-understanding like the Illusion of Explanatory Depth—that is that we think we know more than we do about how the world works. For instance, students in a Yale study thought they knew how toilets work because they use them every day. But when asked to write down the actual way a toilet works, they were not able to do that accurately.<sup>2</sup> We think we understand the world better than we do.

And then there is Confirmation Bias—that the way our mind leads us to be drawn to information that confirms what we already think is true. Study after study shows our innate reluctance to accept facts that contradict what we want to believe is true. We hear what we want to hear. We unconsciously interpret the universe to suit our perspectives. It’s one reason things like stereotypes and propaganda are so effective.

All these aspects of our brain function are real, they are proven. We aren’t good at assessing ourselves. We think we understand things more than we do. And we prefer information that tells us we are right about things.

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It explains a lot about where we are as a country these days, don’t you think? It’s hard for any of us to hold on to an awareness of our own limitations.

Couple all of these aspects of human psychology with the way fear can lead us to behaviors that make our fears come true, and the way the coronavirus situation is evolving is pretty predictable. Fear of scarcity is what creates scarcity—the hoarding of toilet paper, surgical masks, and hand sanitizer are a case in point.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/02/27/why-facts-dont-change-our-minds>

Fear of scarcity creates scarcity. And when we're hit with the reality of how little control we have over things, we look for ways to feel in control—and hoarding is a human behavior, particularly in capitalist/consumer cultures, to make ourselves feel like we have more control than we really do.

We may scoff at the McArthur Wheeler's of the world—but we scoff because we don't want to see how much like him we really are. We're all looking for “the juice,” aren't we? Maybe not the juice that makes us invisible, but the juice that makes us invincible—protected, the exception to the rule.

In fact, right now, many of us may be thinking to ourselves, “everyone else has trouble assessing their own abilities, but I don't! I have a pretty clear picture of myself.” That's you thinking you have the juice.

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All of these layers of human behavior fold into the importance of our faith to lead the way in our lives—especially in troubled times.

That's what's so refreshing about Nicodemus to me. In his own sort of annoying way, he knows what he doesn't know. His skepticism for me isn't a sign of unbelief, but a sign of humility—the sign of his yearning for something more than what it is he knows. It is a thirsty soul that takes Nicodemus out at night to talk to a man he respects but doesn't totally understand.

Skepticism can be the reason faith struggles to take hold. But skepticism can also be what urges us into a more faithful disposition in the world.

Faith is not the absence of skepticism. It is right relationship with skepticism. Faith means we trust God enough to be skeptical about the things that create distortion in us. Faith means we know we are not in control. We know we don't have all the answers. We know bad things can happen to us. We know we need God.

Faith means that those facts of our limitation, those facts of the nature of our existence are held in healthy tension with our curiosity, our wisdom, our lessons learned, and our desire to be alive and thrive.

Nicodemus is there because he doesn't know everything. Jesus is there to stand in contrast to the limits of what it is we think we know, to what it is we think is true.

Jesus is a walking, talking interruption of these psychological habits of our brains—and he comes to a traumatized culture with this healing opportunity—you can change the way you see things, you can change the way you understand, you can trust God, you can trust something you can't see, and you can see something even without completely understanding it.

Your knowledge is limited. God's love is not.

We misread John's Gospel if we read anti-Semitism into his depiction of "the Jews." John's Gospel is not anti-Semitic it is anti-Empire. Jews are not the problem; Rome is the problem. And just like in any occupied culture, people and groups and cultures become splintered and traumatized and everyone struggles to figure out what they have to do to survive.

So, some Jews resisted Rome, some Jews collaborated with Rome, some Jews stuck with tradition, some Jews adapted. And in all of this, there is the trauma of occupation and violence. The context of the Biblical witness is Roman occupation—we so easily forget that in Western Christianity.<sup>3</sup>

When we take a power analysis of Roman Empire into our reading of John—Nicodemus' fears about being seen by other colleagues are well founded. He lives in a time of generational trauma—collective memories of violent crack downs, oppressive regimes, leaders who couldn't be trusted, friends and colleagues who became cooperative with the Empire because that's what they felt they needed to do to survive.

It is in that context that Nicodemus is a skeptic who is afraid scarcity may be the nature of reality. But he's hopeful enough to wonder if his mind and heart can be changed.

Nicodemus' faith made him curious and cautious, courageous and careful.

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We didn't need the coronavirus to tell us that we are vulnerable. We should have already realized that, but we walk around in forgetfulness and illusion.

We all have a bit of McArthur Wheeler in us—we over estimate our protection from being held responsible for our actions. We think we keep our vulnerability invisible, when it is really on display all the time.

We all have a bit of Nicodemus in us, too—we underestimate our own proximity to God and the power of God's love to change us.

Our vulnerability and our capability are both hard for us to see.

And we are all living in a world complicated by the false teachings of Empire—that consumption and individualism and fear need to define us.

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<sup>3</sup> The occupied reality of the New Testament context is an interesting thing to be reminded of in our current political climate. SURJ (Showing Up For Racial Justice) recently had a webinar with an excellent distillation of these connections called "Rome Will Destroy Us," taught by The Rev. Anne Dunlap. I appreciated being reminded of many of these historical realities in that webinar.

The Coronavirus is a good reminder for us.

As Jesus followers we're not afraid of the dark—just like Nicodemus.

And we stand collectively at an age-old mirror reflecting back to us our humanity, the inevitability of death, the physicality of the world that we live and breathe in. Things change fast—and we realize anew that we've been walking on a razor's edge all along.

And Jesus's teachings quench our thirsty souls in that desert of vulnerability and limitation. Understanding ourselves as born again/born from above is really about understanding that our life force is more than simple biology, it is also about mystery—the weaving together of divinity and humanity. We are born again/born from above and so we are liberated from the perils of overestimating and underestimating ourselves.

We stop grasping at things to stay the same and we surrender to a deep trust that God's hand is in all things—in our going out and our coming in, in our limitations and in our capabilities.

As Jesus followers, there is no wilderness, no desert that can take us beyond God's love. This one we are traversing now is no different. It's not fear that defines us. And it's not delusion or avoidance or fool heartedness.

Somewhere between skepticism and scarcity is faith—the willingness to stake our lives on God's abundant love and the capacity to live courageously in this perilous and promising world.

Thanks be to God.