

If you've ever seen a photo of Harriet Tubman, it was probably in black and white. That was the extent of photography in her day—black and white. But then, that was also the extent of her society too—black and white. You were either black or you were white, slave or free, and that was it.

Harriet Tubman saw things differently, however. Before the Civil War, she was a conductor of the Underground Railroad. Nicknamed the "Black Moses," she led slaves out of bondage in the South to liberation in the North. Estimated at three thousand miles long, the route began deep in Louisiana and went all the way up just over the Canadian border. In only a short ten year period, Tubman made 19 trips and escorted hundreds of slaves to freedom.

Right now, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York has an exhibit that gives you a glimpse into what it was like to travel that Underground Railroad. Since no one living today knows what it was like for enslaved men and women seeking a new life for themselves, photographer Jeanine Michna-Bales did her best to help us understand what they went through. Spending a decade researching the routes and shooting photos of the sights along the way, she calls her exhibit "Through Darkness to Light: Photographs Along the Underground Railroad."

You see, fugitive slaves went roughly twenty miles at a time under the cover of darkness. So to help capture what it was like to travel by night, the photographs are taken in varying degrees of darkness. The images showcase what the travelers would have experienced as they moved by foot with only the moon and stars to light the way. There's a moss-covered cave where they might have taken cover. Or the murky Mississippi River. Then, a tree-lined swamp illuminated by the first rays of sunrise.

Having seen some of these pictures, I can tell you they powerfully portray the obscure and mysterious path that these men and women dared to venture. Lying in wait for them everywhere was either the cruelty of nature or the brutality of man. All these travelers had as their guide was the light of the stars. Tubman has said, "God's time is always near. He gave me my strength and He set the North Star in the heavens; He meant I should be free."

Now, Nicodemus, in John's gospel this morning, might not realize it but he's on a similar journey. Like the photo exhibit, darkness and light are a big theme for John the evangelist. I mean, John begins his gospel by writing, "In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." (John 1:4) Then, later on there's Jesus great self-disclosure, "I AM the light of the world." (John 8:12) And smattered throughout his 21 chapters, John makes many more references to night and day, darkness and light. So, if that's such a big theme for John, we would be wise to keep a lookout. This morning, we come across yet another example—John makes mention that when Nicodemus comes to Jesus, he does so "by night." Like a moth to a flame, Nicodemus is drawn to the light, the Light of the world.

Of course, he travels "by night" for practical reasons. Nicodemus wants to be safe, doesn't want anyone to know he's going to see such a controversial figure as Jesus. He's a Pharisee, after all, and a member of the Sanhedrin to boot, so he can't risk anyone questioning his loyalties to the religious establishment. So, Nicodemus makes his way under the cover of darkness. Does he wear a black robe to cover up his flashy Pharisee clothing? Does he pull up a hood to hide his identity? Does he choose side streets instead of main roads to remain covert? We don't know. But what we do know is that he probably visits Jesus at night, because most people are asleep and his movements can go undetected.

But as John lets us eavesdrop on Nicodemus' conversation with Jesus, we learn that his visit "by night" is also a metaphor. Because even though he's wise and learned, every one of Jesus' very clear and simple statements absolutely baffles Nicodemus. Like, when Jesus says that he must be born again, Nicodemus can't help but take it literally—"How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" He's clueless; he's in the dark; he isn't yet enlightened to the things of God. Jesus at least says as much when He criticizes Nicodemus, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?" While Nicodemus might think he's a bright guy, Jesus points out that he's not quite the brightest bulb in the box when it comes to His teachings. It's like Harriet Tubman

once said, “I freed a thousand slaves. I could have freed a thousand more if only they knew they were slaves.” Sometimes we can be so in the dark that we don’t even know it.

Nicodemus isn’t the only one though—did you know that you are on an Underground Railroad of sorts? Have you been enlightened by the Holy Spirit to realize your bondage? God’s Word sheds some light on your gloomy situation. In sin did your mother conceive you—you were born dead in your trespasses and sins. And that sin has such a hold of you that the most apt comparison is slavery. Its chains have wrapped themselves around the way you act, the way you speak, even the way you think. Sin holds you captive—you are powerless against it.

That is, until your new Moses came along—like the “Black Moses” Harriet Tubman, Jesus gives you a chance at freedom. After all, “For God so loved the world,” Jesus says, “that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. 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.” You are stuck in your chains of sin no longer. You now have new life—eternal life—waiting up North for you in heaven. Jesus is taking you to the Promised Land.

Your new life began with Holy Baptism. As Jesus points out today in John 3, by water and the Spirit, you have been born again. Your old life of bondage died with Jesus, and now raised up with Christ you live a free man, a free woman. The power of His forgiveness has burst your bonds, your chains have fallen off, and you’ve been released out of captivity into a better life. When Jesus says you were “born again,” that can also be translated as “born from above.” Which means you are no longer just some slave, but you’ve been born from above, adopted into a heavenly family—you are a child of God now. But while this is most certainly true, I don’t have to tell you that you’re not quite home yet. There’s still a ways to go.

It’s like the Underground Railroad—those slaves were free, they’d escaped their masters, but they hadn’t yet reached the safety of absolute freedom. The long, hard road of life still stretches out in front of you, fraught with dangers on all sides and perils at every turn. The exhibit at The Met details what that road can look like, giving us vivid mental images of what escapees endured in hopes of starting a new life as free men and women. The curator puts it this way—“It does make you think, ‘If that was me, how would I feel? If I were in this very spot, and I heard the sounds of nature or I heard a dog barking, would I be afraid that was somebody coming for me?’ . . . And I think that was [the artist’s] intent,” she goes on, “to help you as a visitor try to imagine yourself in that position of making your journey in hopes of successfully reaching freedom.”

In a lot of ways, you don’t need that exhibit to imagine what it’s like, because you already know. You might be free—a fugitive on the run from your old master, sin, but the rest of the way is dark and it is dangerous. You just don’t know what’s lurking in the shadows up ahead. As you make your way in the dark, it can be tricky not knowing what the future holds. The great unknown is always before you.

You hear the snapping of a twig—is that the devil with his temptations? Then, out of the corner of your eye you catch some movement—is that persecution, martyrdom even? A few more steps, there’s some rustling in the bushes—it’s your flesh talking, telling you to turn around. “Go back,” it says. “Return to your chains. At least your sin is comfortable and familiar.” But resigning yourself to a life of sin—well, that’s more ridiculous than a slave returning to his or her master. Frederick Douglas reminds you, “It’s better to die free than live as a slave.”

If you know about this treacherous way, then take heart. The path you’re now on is well-worn. Jesus first paved the way, He went on ahead to prepare a place for you. And going before you, countless saints have also made the trek and arrived safe and sound. Then there’s safety in numbers—look around you and be encouraged by the many brothers and sisters who are all in this with you. Together, you make your way through this world, looking forward to the hope of a new world.

You’re also not without a guide. You have Jesus Christ as your leader. He has made the trip before and has come back to direct you homeward. He is your North Star, the Light of the world, shining on your path and showing you where to go. He knows the way, so follow Him. Hear, mark, read, and learn His Word—it is a lamp to your feet and a light to your path.

So, as you make your way through this world to the world to come, how are things going right now? Are they dark? Are they dangerous? Are they daunting? That's how it was for the travelers on the Underground Railroad. Just when they approached Canada, just as they were on the cusp of freedom, things had never seemed so bad. I mean, after covering so many miles their bones must've been aching! And after watching their backs the entire time, could anything calm their nerves ever again? After all they had to face, I bet they were second guessing themselves every step of the way! Do you know something about that? Well, also know this. It always seems darkest before the dawn.

Just ask Nicodemus. We might've left off with him in chapter 3, but his journey isn't yet over. Who knows why, but Jesus' words today must've really had an impact. Because you know where we find Nicodemus next? Jesus had just died. His body had come down from the cross. And now He was going to be buried. And you know who's burying Him—Joseph of Arimathea *and* Nicodemus. Imagine, a Pharisee—the very people who plotted against Jesus—even a member of the Sanhedrin—the group that sentenced Jesus to death—is there taking care of Jesus' body. Nicodemus risks everything to give his Lord a proper burial. And interestingly, he does so by night, deep into the wee hours of Holy Saturday.

Now, it sure seems like Nicodemus had seen the light—why else would he have been there? But to him it surely would've felt like the darkest moment of his life—not just the literal darkness of night, but the metaphorical darkness of having the Light of the world snuffed out and lying in his arms. It's at this darkest moment, however, that John's Gospel has a bright beacon of hope waiting just around the corner. In fact, it's the next section after Nicodemus buries Jesus, just a verse after the darkness of night and the darkness of death, that the light of life is about to dawn on Easter morning.

There's a reason the exhibit is called "Through Darkness to Light." There's never a doubt how the journey's going to end—the sun will rise again. After making your way from one image to the next, everyone who walks the dark exhibit always comes up on the last photograph. It's a photo of the bright sunlight of Canada. It represents the end of a long, dark, journey from slavery to freedom—the light at the end of the tunnel.

For Nicodemus, Easter's dawn was about to break. For fugitive slaves, the sunshine of freedom was peeking up just over the horizon. And for you, the light of life is about to shine. When you feel its rays warming your cheeks, you'll understand what Harriet Tubman meant when she said, "I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person now I was free. There was such a glory over everything, the sun came like gold through the trees, and over the fields, and I felt like I was in heaven."