

Nicodemus in the shadows

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In this week's Gospel reading, Jesus speaks of dark and light—one of our most primary realities and symbols. How can this be vivid language today, when we can turn the switch and flood almost any place with light any time?

As I wrote [my magazine reflection on this text](#), I was brought far back to my early poetry reading days: to Kenneth Patchen, of all people. He's a strange poet, somewhat pre-beat, whose work is spiritual, although one could hardly call him an orthodox Christian. Patchen was in that generation that was raised in a traditional Christian world, and the furniture of his mind was Christian to the core, even as he began writing as something of a Dadaist or modernist. [This poem](#) has always stuck with me because of its terrifying vision into the world without love at the center.

In the magazine column I also discuss [Henri Lindegaard's woodcut of Nicodemus and Jesus](#). Karl Schmidt-Rottluff has [an imposing black-and-white interpretation of the Nicodemus story](#) as well. Both helped me get a better sense for the story than I had—maybe because they represent the two men in more symbolic ways, as two abstract forces. I revere the work of Rembrandt, [whose charcoal drawing of the scene](#) is almost modern, Nicodemus's shadow nearly more prominent than his shape. But the actual moderns sometimes help me more, because they can depict forces and emotions they detect in the story more than I might see in a straightforward representation.

Then the dark and light. I remember once the lights going out in our neighborhood just as we drove up to the house. The entire area was dark. My nephew, who was only eight or nine, came in while I looked for a candle and said, "How did people

ever live before electricity?”

I am ancient enough to remember driving out over the prairies of western North Dakota with parents who had known farm life without any electricity, listening to them exclaim at the lights at the farmhouses far off the road. This was all new because of [Rural Electrification](#). The lights looked like stars dotting the plains. And because there was no light spill from any nearby cities, the stars themselves swept across the sky like billions of farms across the universe. Or that is at least what I remember thinking as I lay in the shelf of the back seat tracing out the Big Dipper and Orion. Dark and light seemed more primary then.

I remember a faculty retreat long ago with all of my colleagues welcoming our new president. We were at a camp unfamiliar to most of us and in a meeting room some distance from the lodge where the refreshments were. The lights suddenly went out, and it was pitch dark. We had no inkling of how to get back to the lodge. Our president was wearing a light shirt, and it was the only thing we could see as he walked in front of us and we stumbled along after him. He did find the way, somehow. Maybe a parable of leadership today? When it is truly dark, the light shines more brightly.

That night driving home, I lost my way and found a colleague stopped on one of the by-roads, standing beside his car looking for the North Star so he could get oriented. He did, and he led me out of the woods.

Which is to say, thankfully, that the darkness cannot overcome the light.