

In the days of my storied career as a teenaged community theater character actor, I once had the delightful pleasure of playing one Cousin Jeff, that's Jefferson Davis Clay Pickett if you're familiar, in *Auntie Mame*. Cousin Jeff is stereotypically Georgia genteel, and the description of his voice has stuck with me all these years later. Cousin Jeff "booms like the cannons at Fort Sumter." It's such great direction that, if you know the south and you know Fort Sumter, you know Cousin Jeff.

I love stage directions, those little italicized or parenthetical bits that tell the actors where to stand or what to do with their capes. They fill in some of the gaps in movement and make it clear what's absolutely necessary to understanding the action of the play. But once in a while, you get these little gems -- like Cousin Jeff's voice -- and often they're only known by the folks that read the actual script. Sometimes stage directions are mundane details, something like "she laughs." Sometimes they convey movement or the direction of the speech, "turning to the audience, he rolls his eyes." Sometimes they're more exciting, like Shakespeare's: "Exit, pursued by a bear." And sometimes they're unhelpfully difficult to stage, like Shaffer's impossibility: "They cross the Andes." And sometimes they're a little self-explanatory, like Shakespeare, again, when Romeo says, "I die," and the stage direction confirms he "dies."

I had a professor in seminary who used to make us act out familiar Bible stories. She chose the familiar ones because we tend to pile all sorts of assumptions on top of the ones we know the best, including movement. Like, when Isaac finally got unbound and stared back at Abraham on the mountaintop, the story says Abraham leaves. When we acted that out, the person playing Isaac tried to go with him, and our professor / director hollered "stop!" The directions don't say anything about Isaac going with Abraham, and no wonder. He just as likely -- or maybe more likely -- stayed put. Ya see? Something changes in our understanding when the assumptions get taken out. And when the assumptions do get taken out, all we're left with is the text and our own minds. This is why we read scripture in community, by the way. We need everyone else's minds to complement what we assume is going on in the text. Maybe together we get a fuller picture.

But all this assumption removing and community reading really makes me miss the stage directions that the Bible typically doesn't have. Most of the time, they aren't there, probably never were, and we're left to fill in the blanks. The story of Nicodemus is so familiar to so many that most of us probably already know what it looks like. By "know," of course, I mean "assume." The story is so familiar we assume we know what it looks like. We don't know any more than what the text tells us. So let's break this down.

We do get some scene setting and some character establishment. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, which doesn't mean "bad guy," it just means he was a religiously-oriented Jewish leader. For a lot of us, that's already one assumption challenged. He comes to Jesus by night. The stage is set, right? Well, sort of. It's night, so it's probably dark, but we don't know where. Is this a back alley? A secret room? Jesus's hideout? The text is no help. I always imagined this was Jesus at whoever's house he was crashing at that week, and Nicodemus got word of where he was staying and found him there. Maybe, but there's not really anything in the story to support that. What's different if Nicodemus comes to him in a city park, or near the temple, or wandering the streets of his neighborhood?

There's another layer to Nicodemus arriving at night. In addition to the time, there's a tone set. I have to admit, I always assumed Nicodemus was kinda sneaking out to find Jesus under the cover of darkness. But there's really not much to support that. Maybe he was risking something and needed to be careful. Or maybe Nicodemus just got off work and goes when he can. Think about Hamilton in the deep of Winter. It's almost dark by the time school lets out. That doesn't mean that anything that happens after school lets out is nefarious,

it just means it gets dark early. Maybe night matters here to set the tone, maybe it doesn't. What's different if Nicodemus sneaks over as opposed to walking in like he has nothing to hide?

So that's the setting. That's all we've got. The whole conversation from there on out presents a series of Nicodemus' questions and Jesus' answers completely devoid of context and stage direction. Going strictly off of stage direction, or the lack thereof, Nicodemus never even leaves! He doesn't exit pursued by bears. The scene just ends. Wouldn't it be telling if Nicodemus (and we) got some italicized help? Something like, "Nicodemus considers all that Jesus has said, pulls his hood high enough to hang over his face, and sneaks out into the watchful night." But no, we don't get that.

I know, this probably isn't new for most of you good Bible readers. We know good literature shows not tells, and we know there's a lot of power to what gets left unsaid. We even know there's something worthwhile in leaving room for interpretation. So, why all this talk about stage directions? Because it would be so helpful to know how Jesus and Nicodemus are talking to each other. Nicodemus clearly has some questions, and he's clearly in awe of what Jesus is capable of. But we don't know if the exchange is one of Jesus schooling Nicodemus, scoring points against the establishment OR if it's a sort of witty philosophical fencing match. Does Nicodemus really not understand metaphor or is he pushing on Jesus' use of language to force clarification? I know the way I grew up reading this passage, you might as well've had Nicodemus sitting in a schoolroom desk with Jesus up front tapping a chalkboard. That's certainly one way to read it, and without a clear setting, it very well could be. But it's different if Nicodemus comes to Jesus at a Parisian coffee shop where great minds do battle over philosophical debates and doubleshots of midnight espresso.

Do you see how these different settings change the tone of the scene? My favorite line from the passage, "Are you a teacher and yet you do not understand these things?" shifts. Maybe it's an insult, maybe it's a dig on Nicodemus' intelligence, maybe it's a dig on the established religion and the wisdom they teach. Or maybe it's not. Maybe it's a playful jab, not a dig so much as trash talking among great minds. Or maybe it's a gentle scolding. "Come on, Nicodemus, you know better than that." But we just don't know.

Now as much as I love the clarity that can come with stage directions, sometimes I do appreciate the space left for ambiguity. It's hard enough to study scripture as it is. But at least the ambiguity leaves room for our minds to play with the text. Did you know that was a thing? Did you know it's okay to play with scripture? It is, and greater minds than mine have been doing it for a mighty long time. Jewish tradition calls it Midrash, a kind of scriptural commentary that engages the text, fills in gaps, and even supplies additional stories. It doesn't replace scripture so much as it's yet another way to engage scripture. It spurs on our imagination using the story of God as a starting place.

I guess what I'm getting at is that studying scripture sometimes seems like a dull task. It isn't written the way most of what we read today is. Scripture uses weird phrases and old sayings that've lost their meaning. It often throws troubling ideas into the ether, and it certainly gets tossed around to hurt rather than heal. And all that makes us want to stay far away from whatever's hiding in its pages. I think we expect a strictness, a harsh vision of a world long passed. But there's freedom in the text, too. There's room to play and question and doubt. There's room to come to it by night, and there's room to run away, pursued by bears carrying years of hurtful baggage. And more than anything, there's room for redemption, redemption of the text, sure, but redemption of ourselves, too.

And sometimes, hidden in those old pages there's lines that don't need much context to mean everything to our aching souls. Sometimes through all the debate and play and distaste, sometimes God speaks plainly. And sometimes that voice is as clear as a booming cannon: "For God did not send the Son into the world to condemn it, but that it might be saved through him."