

*March 20, 2011*

# ***“A Visit from Nicodemus”***

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# A Visit from Nicodemus

Third Sunday in Lent Year A

Sermon by Dwight Vogel  
March 20, 2011, Claremont UMC

They call me Nicodemus  
and I've been sent half way around the world,  
and across nearly two thousand years to be with you.  
What can I say? It's a mystery!!

I am a student of Torah, a teacher of Israel  
and one of the few Pharisees to be a member of the Sanhedrin,  
the highest Jewish court.

I pray to be open to God's Spirit,  
seeking God's will and way.

Hillel, my revered teacher, said that the entire Torah  
can be summarized in this way:  
"What is hurtful to you, do not do to another.  
Go forth and learn."

That teaching has been my journey and my destination.  
As a Pharisee, it is learning and prayer that is important.  
The synagogue is a second home to me.  
It's so different from the Saducees  
with their focus on animal sacrifice in the temple  
and their collaboration with Rome.

As a Pharisee, I lived in expectation of a coming messiah.  
someone anointed to bring in God's kin-dom of compassion and peace.

So when I heard that Jesus, a new traveling teacher from Nazareth,  
was attracting attention with his teaching and healing,  
I wanted to learn more.

Like other pharisaic preachers and teachers like myself,  
he taught about prayer, repentance, and doing deeds of loving kindness,  
He was gathering quite a following,  
something clearly disturbing the Saducces and Romans who were in power.

That's what led me to visit Jesus.  
I went at night so as not to attract too much attention.  
I was in enough tension with the Saducees on the Council.  
When Daniel was in the lion's den,  
he didn't pull the lions' tails!!

So I went quietly, privately after the sun had set.  
I greeted him respectfully,  
telling him I believed he was a God-sent teacher.

Immediately he seemed to know  
that I wanted to learn more about the kin-dom of God  
about which he was teaching.  
Before I had time to ask a question, he gave his answer:  
"Truly I tell you,  
no one can see the kin-dom of God  
without being born from above."

"I'm not a young man anymore," I said with a twinkle in my eye.  
"let alone a baby!  
Am I to return to my mother's womb again and be born?"

And Jesus opened to me the truth of what he had said.  
"To enter the kin-dom of God, you have to be born of the Spirit.  
I'm not talking about the birth of the body.  
What is born of the flesh is flesh,  
but what is born of the Spirit is spirit.  
That's why I said you must be born from above.  
When the wind blows, you hear it,  
but you don't know where it comes from or where it goes.  
That's how it is with those who are born of the Spirit from above."

We talked some more about that.  
I remembered Father Abraham, the lonely migrant,  
who set out, trusting God,  
not knowing where the journey would take him.  
It wasn't something he could just think in his head,  
or feel in his heart, or just entrust to his feet.  
This faith or trust involved all of him, every part.

It rang true for me,  
and when I left his room that night,  
I knew we shared the same commitments to God's kin-dom.

But I didn't yet know the key part Jesus himself would play.

Later, when the religious authorities were ready to arrest him,  
I could keep quiet no longer.  
I challenged them in terms of the law itself,  
for our law does not allow for someone to be judged  
without giving him a hearing,  
and learning what he is really doing.  
This I had already done for myself.

Later, that is exactly what the council sought to do.  
It was night when they did it,  
and the process was flawed,  
but at least they questioned him.  
My own comments came to nothing.  
They saw Jesus as a dangerous teacher,  
opposed to the authority of the Saducees.

The Pharisees were not the ruling party,  
and the Saducees hid behind a false support of the Roman emperor.  
All this talk about the kin-dom of God was suspect.

You know Jesus was condemned and executed,  
a cruel execution it was on a cross something like that.  
If anyone would have told me the cross  
would become a central symbol for the followers of Jesus,  
I would have laughed.  
It was a symbol of torture and disgrace and defeat .

But when he was dead, I used my position to advantage.  
With my friend Joseph of Arimathea, we went to the authorities  
and were allowed to take his body down from the cross  
and bury it in one of Joseph's tombs.  
What happened after that is a story for another day.

But I want to tell you about another visit,  
this time a visit made to me by young John,  
one of Jesus' disciples.  
You won't find a record of that visit itself  
in the gospel John's followers later wrote.  
But that's how he learned more about my visit to Jesus at night.  
And it was young John who helped me understand what it really meant.

John reminded me of that brass serpent Moses made  
and put up on a pole in the wilderness  
so that the children of Israel might be healed.  
“It’s like that with Jesus, God’s chosen one,” he said.

God’s kin-dom is all about life, abundant life,  
life with eternal significance.  
Jesus was lifted up on that cross.  
If you can trust that God is there,  
right there in the middle of his suffering and death,  
in Jesus himself,  
you find eternal life in that trust,  
your life has a significance that no one or nothing can take away from you.  
John told me:  
“God loved the world so much  
that he gave the Chosen One, even Jesus,  
that whoever faiths in him won’t be defeated by anything in life or death,  
but will have life with eternal significance in God’s kin-dom.”

Now, you people here today  
in this strange place with your strange clothes  
you also have a very strange language!

I heard the reader talking about  
believing in Jesus.  
And I know enough about your language to know  
that beliefs are understood as propositions you take as true.  
They involve a mental activity, a conceptual assent.

Or sometime you say,  
“Well, I believe that may be true”  
when you aren’t at all sure it’s true.

Now what Jesus talked to me about,  
and what John thought Jesus meant,  
doesn’t have much in common with either of those two meanings:  
intellectual assent that something is true,  
or half-hearted wondering whether its true or not  
which is also a mental activity.

No, the word Jesus and John both used is the Greek verb for faith,  
and while faith doesn’t park the mind outside the door,  
faithing is living, dynamic active trust

that involves every fiber of your being.

And God loves the world so much  
that the Chosen One, even Jesus, came  
to embody a love that even torture and death cannot cancel,  
a love not for just the select few,  
religious professionals like myself,  
but a love through which the whole world might find wholeness.

So when you lift your eyes to the mountains out there,  
mountains that can quake and shake and crumble  
and ask where your help will come from,  
put your eyes on the cross  
where God stands with us in the extremities of life,  
and trust God came to us in Jesus Christ  
not to condemn the world,  
but that the world might be made whole.

It's not just about beliefs;  
It's all about **faithing**.

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