

LENT II

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews (in Palestine).

John 3:17

Some people call me "the night disciple." I wasn't exactly a disciple though. I was a religious leader, and most of my colleagues condemned Jesus as radical, disruptive, heretical, and dangerous.

I'd seen the Nazarene and heard some of his teaching. I'd heard rumors about his miracles. But I was skeptical. So I visited him in the night where I could talk with him personally, rabbi to rabbi.

I was a religious scholar. He was a teacher who claimed to have signs from heaven. I was an intellectual. He was, maybe, a miracle-worker. He was, maybe, a charlatan. I'd seen my share of those, confidence men with all their razzle-dazzle, deluding the poor, the ill, and the disfigured, whose desperation made them credulous. If that was Jesus' game, I wanted to find out for myself, and expose him for a fraud.

But if he was genuine, I needed to know that. Something was missing from my own faith and practice. I knew the law, inside and out, but I'd never felt the living presence of God in my life. My spiritual life was arid, theoretical.

I went to Jesus at night. Some people have called me a coward, but I can live with that. I didn't want my fellow Pharisees on the Jewish ruling council to know. As I've said, they claimed he was a danger to society. But the real issue was, he threatened their authority. Even more petty, they were jealous of all the attention he was getting.

If they knew I'd gone to see him, they would've kicked me off the council. And I wasn't ready to jeopardize that until I knew more about this guy.

I had to know. So I went to him. Am I glad? I wish I knew for sure. Let me just say that that visit changed my life forever.

I began by complimenting him. That's generally a good strategy for getting someone's attention encouraging them to let down their guard. I told him we all knew he had come from God, and could do signs. But my strategy, I have to say, backfired

He responded to my flattery with what seemed a calculated insult. He told me I needed a new life. I needed to be reborn. I needed the Holy Spirit. I thought, *You arrogant pretender! I'm a rabbi myself. I'm the expert here.*

He continued his discourse, and I didn't understand much of what he said. He talked about being *born again*. What was that?

We're only born once, I told him, everybody knows that. So I began to think he really was a con man. Was he going to show me someone entering back into the womb and being born again? I don't think so.

In trying to explain himself, he began even more obscure. He talked about being *born again of water and the spirit!* He made me feel stupid, and that's never fun, particularly for someone who fancies himself a learned teacher and *scholar*.

How can these things be? I wondered. I felt naïve, gullible. I felt like a child.

But there was something so serious, so committed, so determined, so loving in his face as he talked to me.

The story has it that we talked alone. But I couldn't get rid of his little band of followers. He insisted they stay with us throughout the night. And they all looked at me the same way Jesus did. They clearly believed him when he proclaimed that God loves the world, and that he, Jesus, had come to save all who believe.

That night was a turning point for me. I was still filled with doubts and uncertainty, but I became a follower. Why? Well, not because of Jesus' words, exactly, because I still don't fully understand what he said, not in my mind. I have come to realize that he was dealing in the realm of mystery, holy mystery; he was talking about the mind and heart of God, which we can never completely know or understand.

No, it was not a mental conversion I had that night. It was emotional, and personal, and it had to do with the other people in the room. Clearly, they *felt* the truth of what Jesus was saying. I had a sense – that's been confirmed over and over – that these folks with Jesus were not always the brightest lamps in the hall. But they were a band of loving, committed, prayerful women and men, and I left that night feeling, in some curious way, already one of them.

I had been lonely, doubting, and fearful always that my doubts would isolate me and put me in peril of banishment from the religion of my training and my mind. But I left that night feeling welcome, feeling wanted, feeling invited, feeling included. Feeling loved.

I learned to love in return. Jesus loved us to the end, and I loved him as well. After he was executed, I helped Joseph of Arimathea prepared his blessed body for burial. I brought 75 pounds of myrrh and aloe to anoint Jesus. It was the least I could do.

And somehow, as I rubbed those soothing fragrant balms into his poor desecrated body, I felt I understood something for the first time, and finally. In loving, I felt loved. I felt born again in the spirit, and despite my grief, able to carry on. Able to assure others as Jesus and his friends had assured me: *you are loved, you are forgiven, you are saved.* Amen.