



DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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CLOSE ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS:

NICODEMUS

Scripture: John 3:1-17 [also 7:40-51 and 19:38-42]

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OVERVIEW

The conversion of Nicodemus is one of the Bible's most touching accounts. It is evidence of the transforming power of Jesus Christ and what He can do to the heart that seeks truth and longs for more than this world can deliver.

OPENING

We continue today looking close up at some encounters people in the New Testament had with Jesus—in hopes that we, too, might encounter the risen Christ and be changed by it.

- Two weeks ago, we looked at the GERASENE DEMONIAK: A wild & crazy man, on lunatic fringe; demon-driven.
- Last week it was the WOMAN WITH THE ALABASTER JAR: She had a past and a reputation to go with it.
- Today, NICODEMUS: Much more respectable & sane. . .much more like us. Here is a man who is wealthy, powerful, self-reliant. Why would he need Jesus? Why would he seek him out? Why should we, unless our life is falling apart?

We'll see why as we go along this morning. Right now, let's try to catch the story. It's found in **John, chapter 3, verses 1-17:**

*Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council (the Sanhedrin). He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. **6**Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. . .The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and you do not understand these things? I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? **7**Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*

FIRST ENCOUNTER

Curious fellow, this Nicodemus, who came to Jesus one night. Out of the darkness, he came—secretly—at night when no watching eyes could see. Out of the blackness of his own unbelief, he came, by night, to see Jesus.

Why? What piqued his interest? After all, Jesus refers to him as “*Israel’s teacher*” (v. 10). He knew the Old Testament. He had read the passages about the coming Messiah. He was an expert. . .he had his Ph.D.. . .he was a learned teacher of others. Why would he need or want to be taught?

Apparently, he hadn’t grasped the full meaning of Scripture. He **knew about God**; but that’s not the same as **knowing God**—directly, personally. Knowledge is not salvation.

I believe Nicodemus came to Jesus out of a deeply felt spiritual hunger. Something was gnawing on him, something he couldn’t quite put his finger on. Yes, he was comfortable and successful in worldly trappings; but he was lost and he knew it.

Out of the darkness of his own soul, curious Nicodemus comes to hear Jesus talk of a birth from above into the below—a new birth—A BIRTH OF WATER (that’s baptism) AND THE SPIRIT (that’s the work of God’s Holy Spirit working deep in our hearts).

With the darkness of night outside, Nicodemus listens to Jesus talk of THE BRONZE SERPENT OF MOSES. Now, what’s that all about? Once, in the day of Moses, when the Israelites were wandering out in the desert, God sent a plague of snakes because the people had copped such rebellious attitudes. Those doomed to die from snakebite could be healed by one simple act of obedience—looking up at an elevated bronze snake and believing that God would heal them if they did. [cf. Numbers 21:8-9]

So here’s Nicodemus, in the dark of night, hearing of faith in One lifted up from the earth—One greater than Moses—One who would be suspended between earth & sky on a cross and would put an end to the sting of sin and the biting curse of spiritual death. And all we have to do is look to Him and believe in Him alone for redemption.

Nicodemus comes by night to see Jesus—and he listens. And he begins to see the light. . .and to walk in the light. He begins to grasp the width, length, height, and depth of God’s love for the world and all who are in the world. And he leaves that evening’s encounter a changed man. He comes away with a whole new understanding of both God and himself.

SECOND ENCOUNTER

We next see Nicodemus in **John 7 (vv. 40-51)**. He stands to defend Jesus before the council, in front of his peers on the Sanhedrin. Others are plotting the death of Jesus, because:

- He has healed a man on the Sabbath==a big “no-no”. That makes him worthy of death for being merciful to the sick!
- He has also managed to make himself a blasphemer (i.e.: making himself equal with God) by calling God his own Father.
- He has antagonized the Jews (his own people) by claiming to be greater than Moses.

Nicodemus screws up his courage and rises to the defense. He who came to Jesus first under the cover of darkness now stands before the Jewish council in broad daylight to speak for Jesus. He basically takes the role of an advocate, asking that Jesus have the right to due process (i.e.: a fair hearing). For Nicodemus, the darkness is disappearing in the face of the Light of the World. Those who believe no longer remain in the darkness!

THIRD ENCOUNTER

His final appearance is found in **John 19 (vv. 38-42)**. Nicodemus comes into the darkness that hovers about

a cross. Dark day this—this Black Friday. The One whom he sought by night now hangs lifeless on the tree. The One whom he defended by day now slumps from nails. The dusk is gathering. He and his friend, Joseph of Arimathea, must take the body of Jesus from the cross and bury it before nightfall.

These two come to attend their Lord! Nicodemus comes with myrrh and aloes—hundreds of dollars worth of lavish spices to give Jesus’ body proper preparation for burial. There’s nothing hesitant about his movements. . .no holding back. Nicodemus is moving boldly and openly here —risking not only his position but his life (for being identified with this Jesus). He and Joseph lovingly wrap the body of Jesus. . . carry it. . . and carefully lay it in a tomb.

Nicodemus now knows the beaten and pierced figure in his arms was the Son of God. Ironically, the English translation of the name NICODEMUS in its original language means “innocent blood”. On his once-pious robe is smeared the blood of Jesus—the only truly innocent blood—the blood that covered his sin AND the sin of the whole world.

CONCLUSION

Can you tell from these three appearances in John’s Gospel that Nicodemus was a changed man? Yes, he may have come in the dark of night, but he didn’t stay there long. He obviously got a lot more than he expected that first night (i.e.: a challenge to a whole new life!). He was truly “born again”—and now living and walking in the Light.

Today, Nicodemus is still the teacher—our teacher. What do we learn from his encounter with Jesus?

1. We can come to Jesus anytime—in the light of day, in the dark night of the soul. . .in public (at a crusade, in a small group setting) or in private (when no one is around).
2. We learn that a relationship with Him answers our most confounding questions—in time.
3. We learn that everyone needs Jesus—the blatant sinner. . .the respectable teacher of religion. . .and everyone inbetween.
4. There is nothing more important than the regenerative life of Christ within us.
5. Sometimes it takes awhile to come out of the dark—it did for Nicodemus. But God is always patient with us.
6. Identifying with Jesus may carry some risk. It certainly did for Nicodemus.

What will you do with Jesus this morning? Will you say: *“I’ve got it all together. I can manage quite well on my own. Why do I need a ‘Savior’? What have I done that’s all that bad? I’m educated, respectable, law-abiding, honest (most of the time). Isn’t it negative, starting with ‘what’s wrong, what’s bad about me’? I don’t have any major ‘sin’ in my life. So what’s all this fuss about needing to be born again. . .redeemed. . .saved?”*

We are less likely to see our need than someone like the Gerasene Demoniac or the Woman with the Alabaster Jar. Their need seemed so obvious. But ours is just as critical. We are all estranged and separated from God who created us—no matter how outwardly “respectable” or “together” we look.

ILLUSTRATION: A child estranged from biological family will always search out that family member. That’s the spiritual hunger (longing) in all of us.

I can guarantee you this: if you turn toward Christ, the Holy Spirit will lead you to an awareness of what separates you from Him and bring you to reconciliation.