

## The man who came by night

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on Trinity Sunday, June 7, 2009.

*Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"*

John 3:9

By all accounts Nicodemus was a good man. In each and every situation, he tried to do the right thing based upon the teachings of the Torah. As a Pharisee, he strove to observe the laws as faithfully as he could because following the strict letter of the law was the standard of goodness and righteousness in those times. Following a list of rules and regulations as a measure of goodness seems cold and lacking in compassion, but it was the standard of that time.

Nicodemus was a conservative and very much a part of the establishment. At the same time, he was open to what others had to say. Both conservatives and liberals can be very close minded, but he maintained an open attitude to the ideas and thinking of others. When Nicodemus hears about Jesus and his radical teachings, he decides to go and talk with him personally to find out for himself. Nicodemus is also a member of the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of Palestine. It is part of his job to investigate false prophets who are leading people astray in regard to the Torah. He knows that he has to set aside any preconceived notions in interviewing this teacher who is challenging so many of their cherished old traditions. Because of his position, Nicodemus needs to meet with Jesus privately and goes to him in the dark of night.

Nicodemus begins by complimenting Jesus, telling him that he is a teacher come from God. Jesus loses no time in getting right to the point by telling him that he must be born anew. He tells him that he must be born again of water and the Spirit to inherit the Kingdom of God. Nicodemus is used to metaphorical references to the majestic Spirit of God. He believes the law is the sole link in the great chasm between God and humanity. But he is perplexed. How can you be born again after having grown to adulthood? How can you return to the womb? Jesus explains that after your physical birth into this world you must be spiritually reborn. That life giving Spirit of God is the power behind all creation in the person of Jesus as the Christ of God. We must be spiritual born again to live out the commandment to love God with all your heart, soul, and mind and to love and respect others as we want to be loved and respected.

To be reborn in the Holy Spirit means starting all over again. This does not mean making a few changes and amendments, but starting over from scratch. A good place to begin is to be completely honest with ourselves. It means maintaining a sense of integrity by taking the gospel seriously every day of our life. We have to start all over in our attitude, our thinking, and the way we relate to others. It means going back to the beginning and making radical changes in who we are and how we live.

What Nicodemus is beginning to understand is that his relationship to God is unlike anything he has ever known. He is beginning to comprehend that he is sitting face to face with the living God in human form. Just as Moses was confronted with the living God in the form of a burning bush, Nicodemus is encountering God in the person of Jesus. He is face to face with one of the three most important ways in which God is revealed to us.

When my bishop laid hands on me in ordination forty-three years ago, being commissioned to preach the gospel it felt as if the coach was sending me out on to the field to win souls for Christ. The same stole that was my father's was placed on my shoulder as I was given a

Bible and charged to preach the gospel of forgiveness and reconciliation in the name of the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

This is Trinity Sunday. The Trinity is not just some doctrinal riddle; it is not understood intellectually, but relationally. Our relationship with God as Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier enables us to experience God in three most important ways. Those prime functions, though distinct and separate, all form our experience of God. Just as the substance of H<sub>2</sub>O appears in different forms as water, ice, and steam, so the one God of us all is experienced in three distinct and essential ways.

Long ago, St. Augustine wrote that "God loves each one of us as if there were only one of us to love." How the great, soaring majestic God is so intimately involved in our lives is indeed a great mystery. But that is what makes God unique. God's grace and love is neither earned nor deserved, but is given freely. God is so far ahead of us in being able to love the unlovable, challenging us to strive to emulate the person of Christ Jesus as a model for us.

Each of us has the power to build a better world, beginning where we are. That is why we must be willing to start over and begin a new direction in the way we live. Once that commitment to change is made, our lives are transformed. What is changed is who we are deep down inside. Most of us spend the whole of our lives getting to know who we are. Until we can know our inmost selves, no one else will. The more we are in touch with ourselves, the more we sense the presence of God within.

How and when we are able to recognize that spark of the divine within depends on our willingness to make the effort to find out. We can if we are willing to see life from a different perspective and live by a different set of standards. It can be done because it has been done in the lives of those who have been changed forever. It is possible in all of us and I'm quite sure it is possible in you.

We don't exactly know what became of Nicodemus after his encounter with Jesus. We can only assume that his life was somehow changed because he appears once more at the end of the gospel narrative. After Jesus' death on the cross, Joseph of Arimathea goes to Pilate to ask for the body of Jesus to be buried in his garden tomb. And there with him is Nicodemus who brought with him the spices and the linen cloth for the burial. Rather than remain on the sidelines after his encounter with Jesus, it is more likely that his life was changed by him. Because of his openness in learning new ways of doing things, Nicodemus was most likely never again the same. From that encounter, he saw life in a new and different way. He was in touch with things that matter. He understood that life was more than following rules and regulations. He started all over by being compassionate every day in every way.