

Meeting the Master...Under the Cover of Darkness

Sterling UMC
March 20, 2011
John 3:1-17, 19:38-42

It was the snake that started it all, we know – the serpent that cost us all our place in paradise, and drove us out into the wilderness. Another snake was used to help me understand. “As Moses lifted the serpent in the wilderness,” the teacher told me once, when I met him under the cover of darkness, “so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” Standing at the foot of the cross, I now see what that means.

Perhaps I should have known before, I am regarded after all, as a “teacher in Israel.” You don’t know much about me, but the people of Israel did. I was born into one of the wealthiest and most prominent families in the Holy City. My father was a strong and influential man – that is how we got where we did. And I, his favored son, Nicodemus ... well, I was not what my father wanted me to be. He tried to make me strong. If I were to become influential, I would need status in the religious life of my people. “You must become a Pharisee,” my father said. I did. And then, “We must get you elected to the Sanhedrin.” And with his money behind me, I was.

But in all truthfulness, I was nothing like my father – strong-willed, powerful, outspoken as a leader. No, the truth is that I avoided in any way possible any kind of conflict or confrontation. I found my security in just going along with the crowd. And as I now stand here at the foot of the cross, I know who I am and what I am. A COWARD! I had the power and the influence; I had the voice, the opportunity to speak. I could have stopped this crucifixion. At least I could have tried. But they were like snakes in the grass.

It was three in the morning when they called, the dead of night. Word came to me by a messenger, already winded from running up and down the midnight streets of Jerusalem. “A special meeting of the council, the Sanhedrin,” he cried, and off he ran. That was illegal, and they knew it; we were not allowed to meet at such an hour. What could be so important to demand a breach of rules like this? I would object, I told myself as I came rushing in.

And then I saw him ... Jesus. But why was he here? His hands were bound. Where were his followers? I recognized him, of course, “The Teacher.” I had seen him many times before. Not long ago, as a matter of fact – in something of an uncharacteristic moment for me – when soldiers had been sent to bring Jesus to the council ... and they came back empty handed ... I did in a way stand up for him. “Does your law judge a man before it hears him?” I asked. They turned on me and snarled, “Are you a Galilean too?” That was enough; it stopped me cold. I feared saying anything more. So now, before this illegal session, there was no way I was going to speak – no way! They already knew what they wanted – death – and they would get it, their way.

I watched and I listened as Caiaphas, acting less like God's high priest and more like some crazed maniac, kept charging, kept probing, kept asking, kept accusing – searching for some way, some opening, someone to testify. But all to no avail ... until in desperation, Caiaphas faced Jesus head on. Calling a halt to everything else, he cried out, "Enough of this! There is really only one issue at stake, and it is simply this: Answer me under oath to the Supreme God of Israel, and tell us, "Are you the Son of God, as you have claimed?" The silence was heavy, as if it were to crack under its own weight, for if he answered yes, he would die as a blasphemer. They waited, and into the silence he boldly proclaimed, "I am."

Caiaphis, like a man out of his mind, tore at his robe, ripping it at its hem, the sigh of unbearable grief and horror, crying out at the same time, "Blasphemy! Blasphemy! You heard him! What more witness do we need? He is guilty of death! Death!!" I heard it, and said not a word. I was frozen with fear at what was happening. I was frozen with ... a coward's fear.

But no more. Today I will become a poor man among my people. Today I will become an outcast. Once they hear that I have accepted him – as Son of God, as Savior – they will seek to destroy me too. Here at the foot of the cross, the picture is becoming clear. As I look up at him, hanging there upon the cross, his words come rushing back to me.

That night – over a year ago – under the cover of darkness I had crept up to the rooftop to talk with him. I was curious. No, more than curious, I was stirred; stirred by the way the people listened to Jesus. They listened as if he were the only one with truth. I had an inquiring mind. And inquiring minds want to know. Who was this Jesus? What was so different and unique about him?

I was also stirred by what I saw Jesus do. Like the time Jesus stormed into the temple and overturned the tables of the moneychangers. I once knew such passion. But that was a long time ago – before the titles, before the robes, before the rules. You see I had become what you would call a legalist. My life had become mired in the swamps of religious laws and practices. Chained by the rules and restrictions. I knew there was something more, but I didn't know where to find it. So I went to Jesus.

I was drawn to a carpenter, but I couldn't risk being seen with him. What would my friends think? What would my father think? What would my colleagues on the Sanhedrin think? I was afraid to find out. So I snuck out of my home late one night and went to meet Jesus under the cover of darkness.

I began with courtesies, "Teacher, we know you are sent from God, because no one can do the miracles you do unless God is with him."

Jesus disregarded the compliment. No chitchat. No idle talk. Straight to the point. "I tell you the truth, unless one is born again, he cannot be in God's kingdom," He said.

He spoke with such power and authority, but what did that mean? What did he mean as he spoke to me? That's when I asked him that all important question; "How can a man be born again when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" Jesus answered me and spoke about being born of the water and the Spirit. He said flesh gives birth to flesh, but the spirit gives birth to spirit." But what did he mean by this? I walked away that night confused and still unsure about exactly what he meant.

That was then, and this is now. Now some of the things he said have become quite clear to me: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up." That's what he said ... and then that glorious promise, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." Those were his words.

I have pondered those words these last few months. I have wrestled with them. And now I fully understand. I once was blind but now I see. And what I see is the true source of spirituality; "human life comes from human parents, but spiritual life comes from the Spirit."

Spiritual life is not a human endeavor. It is rooted and orchestrated by the Holy Spirit. Every spiritual achievement is created and energized by God.

In other words Jesus had been saying to me that night, "You can't help the blind by turning up the light, Nicodemus. You can't help the deaf by turning up the music, Nicodemus. You must be born again, Nicodemus. Despite how religious you are, or how much authority you have, in order for you to understand, you must become a new being, a new creation. You must have the breath of spiritual life breathed into you from the Spirit of God." I thought the person did the work. Jesus says God does the work. I thought it was a tradeoff. Jesus says it is a gift. I thought man's job was to earn it. Jesus says man's job is to accept it.

And when you do accept this gift, this new birth brings about a complete change in your relationship with God. It involves a radical change of heart. It means a complete change of direction to a new destination. And that is what has happened to me.

And now as I stand here at the foot of the cross, looking into the face of this righteous man, I also see how foolish I was to cringe in pain over my cowardice for not trying to stop the crucifixion. You see he did not want me to save him – he came to save me! And all who believe in him. "...That the world might be saved through him."

I am still ashamed of my cowardice, but I am a coward no more. I will not slither like a serpent. With my friend Joseph, I will claim his body. We will carry him to rest in the grave. This is my Savior, and though we lay him in the tomb, his words still echo hope; "I am the resurrection and the life. I go to prepare a place for you."

And so the time for silence is over, the time for fear and cowardice, gone. For such he died. Now is the time to speak. "What you have seen in secret proclaim openly," he said. I called on him in secret once, under the cover of darkness and in fear, in arrogance and ignorance. "You must be born again," he said; "of water and the Spirit, born again." I am. And that is why I now am bold to speak.

And so I say to you today, don't be a coward. Don't be like I was. Don't be bound in legalism. A legalist believes the supreme force behind salvation is you. If you look right, speak right, and belong to the right segment of the right group, you will be saved. The brunt of the responsibility doesn't lie with God, it lies with you.

The result? The outside sparkles. The talk is good and the step is true. But look closely. Listen carefully. Something is missing. What is it? Joy. What's there instead? Fear, arrogance, and failure. Fear that you won't do enough. Arrogance that you have done enough. And failure because you always fall short.

You see, as I learned, being religious or having authority, is not the criterion. You can attend church seven times a week. Serve on every committee. You can memorize every verse in the Bible. You can understand every doctrine. You can be baptized, receive communion, pray ten times a day – and it means nothing unless the Spirit of God has grabbed you and made you a new creation.

So don't be a coward. Be born again. Find the same freedom and release that I have found. If Jesus can do it for me, he can and will do it for you.

The good news today is that one man did have the courage to raise his hands and he himself was raised, to draw all people unto himself. Because, you see, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life." This is marvelous news, especially for people who don't always stand up to be counted. For me, Nicodemus, Christ took a stand. Jesus stood up for us. May we stand up for him.