

Lent 2-A, February 17, 2008  
Galilee Church, Virginia Beach  
A sermon by the Rev. Dr. James B. Magness

"...Nicodemus, a (Pharisee and) leader of the Jews... came to Jesus by night..."

## INTRODUCTION

Today our scripture stories have a great deal to do with people who are embarked upon the great journeys of their lives. While Nicodemus was on a journey of the heart, another, Abram, was on a journey across the land. Both, however, were embarked on journeys of the soul.

In just a moment I will get to Nicodemus and Abram who have a message for us. The thought of their sagas takes me back to a time in my life when such ongoing tales first became of great importance.

When I was a young boy one of the joys of life was to take my quarter on a Saturday afternoon, go down town to the Carolina Theater and watch matinee movies. This was a long time ago. We still had a lot of black & white movies, with black folk sitting in the balcony and white folk sitting below in the main part of the theater. As I said it was a long time ago.

Most of the black and white movies were westerns with long forgotten heroes like Hopalong Cassidy and Tom Mix. In those days there was a feature of the early movie going experience that almost always kept us coming back week after week: the serials. This wasn't cereal in a bowl, but the serial stories that each week unfolded like chapters in a book and increased our curiosity so that we would come back the next week to view a new episode; a paying customer with another quarter in hand. For example we always wanted to see the new worlds and strange new beings that the outer-space explorer Buck Rogers would encounter.

1. The story of our man in Jerusalem, Nicodemus, is very much an unfolding serial; correct, not the stuff in a bowl.

In the first serial we see Nicodemus in today's Gospel of John episode representing every man and every woman who has ever pondered eternity and looked for the entry gateway to eternal life. Later in John's gospel in the next exciting episode we'll read about Nicodemus again when he is a Jewish leader in the council of Pharisees as the question comes up on how to arrest this troublesome Jesus.<sup>1</sup> Nicodemus is the lone recorded voice arguing for fairness. In the final episode in John's gospel we'll read about Nicodemus again when he came with Joseph of Arimathea to attend to the purportedly dead Jesus and anoint the so-called messiah with perfumed spices.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John 7.45-42, *New Revised Standard Version*.

<sup>2</sup> John 19.38-42, *NRSV*.

Some think that these three serial-like episodes of the Nicodemus story are like the quest of a man toward faith in Jesus; a faith that may have begun when Jesus found Nicodemus coming in out of the night and completed when Nicodemus found Jesus at the tomb. Most likely there never would have been an experience at the tomb for Nicodemus, had he not first made the journey to Jesus in the dark of the night.

Nicodemus came to Jesus that dark night in the first serial episode seeking to know about the new rules of Jesus pertaining to life with God. Jesus' response to Nicodemus was that while you are asking for information, what you really need is transformation. You want for your life more security when what you really need is a new identity. You think you can blend back into your old society when what you really need is a new community. Jesus knew that Nicodemus' needs would not be solved by more data, but by the new identity that only comes through total transformation.

This was the hinge event that made everything else possible. When I look back at my life I can see so very many hinge events where seeds were planted that only came to harvest perhaps many years later. I knew at the Carolina Theater in the 1950s that there was something wrong with having black folk sit in the inferior seats separated from white folk. However, it would take many years for that seed of a thought to come to harvest in my life and in the society in which I grew up. That "something wrong" was the sin that had to be purged from our lives so we could get new identities of who we were so we could change the communities in which we lived.

2. Abram, about whom we also heard this morning, and Nicodemus, were both on a journey or quest. Abram went full speed ahead into the wilderness leading his people. Nicodemus came in from the darkness to the light of Jesus, but soon returned right back into the darkness from which he came. Both knew that their journeys had promise. Though they may not have known it at the time, both were going to a new place with God.

Abram, you see, was an economic migrant and a desert nomad who led his family and people toward the land of promise. It has been said that Abram had traveling in his genes – that he was made to be a nomad. He led his people to a land that was supposed to be more than a good land or even a better than normal place. God had given Abram a five-star destination. However, the trip to get there beat anything the Griswolds in National Lampoon's "Vacation" series of movies has ever come close to. Abram's trip truly was a trip to be remembered. But, difficult or not, Abram had burned his bridges. He could not go back, only forward. Security is behind him, and there is no road map for the journey in front of him. There is no AAA or dash mounted GPS to help. No flight-plan, no itinerary, no routing. Only GOD can show Abram the way.

The practicalities of the spiritual life, and the spiritual journey that comes with it, rarely, if ever, are free of difficulties: detours, road construction, potholes and bad maps. Often I find myself musing that it is just too hard to be a follower of Jesus; particularly right here and right now; wherever and whatever "right here" and "right now" happens to be.

Abram was called away from everything he knew as familiar to all that would be foreign. Abram heard from God that there would only be three things he would have to give up:

- His country
- His family
- His father's house

In response God would fulfill his part of the covenant and give Abram:

- A new land
- A great nation
- The blessing of all future generations

We know that Abram obeyed God said "yes", and God:

- Fulfilled the covenant with a new land
- Created the nation of Israel
- Continues to bless his people even today.

Abram sacrificed, but his sacrifice would never and could never come anywhere near matching what God gave in return.

Many of you have traveled a great deal, so Abram's journey sounds a bit familiar to you. Have you ever noticed that when you travel to a new place it is always an opportunity for some new beginnings – new starts – even the opportunity to build a new identity? Abram's journey is the essential part of who he would become; the essential part of his new identity. But in order to move toward the new identity God would give Abram, first Abram had to let go of his old identity – and leave it behind in the old place.

3. Nicodemus of course had his own journey. However, his was not so much a journey you could chart on a map as it was a journey charted on his heart.

Nicodemus probably would have been more comfortable to have stayed within the confines of his familiar Jewish faith. However, perhaps Nicodemus knew something that all of us would do well to heed. Perhaps Nicodemus knew that the way to find comfort is to confront the spiritual discomfort in his life head on. I wonder what darkness that Nicodemus faced in his own life that had so unsettled him that he had to go to Jesus. Just how agitated had the Nicodemus, a Jewish Pharisee, become that he would risk his status and reputation by going to see Jesus? It must have been bad, really bad. Yet, we've all had those beckonings of God to go into the uncharted areas of faith, areas in which we sense there is not only great challenge, but also great opportunity for spiritual growth. Nicodemus had such a beckoning. He had to take the risk because that discomfort he experienced deep down inside was just more than he was willing to live with. Nicodemus had come to the point in life that he knew he had to act.

Though that first night with Jesus would not to be Nicodemus' big night of discovery, it would be the beginning of his journey. That night he would hear the most famous and most quoted and most memorized words from Jesus: "For God so loved the world..." After hearing Jesus, Nicodemus would walk back out into the darkness of the night. But

his walk back into darkness would be the formal beginning of a heart-felt journey that would change his life. The seed had been planted, and ultimately Nicodemus' life would be changed. Nicodemus would have a new identity as one of Jesus' people. That night Nicodemus took the hard step to confront the most troubling reality of his life. He wanted to know what his life was built upon.

## CONCLUSION

A journey or quest of faith is unfolding at Galilee. While I have hope that God will move mightily in the lives of the people in this congregation, our reality is that God already has moved in a dramatic way. Many people at Galilee are at a point on the journey we sometimes call "change time." Today I have talked about the change time that happened in the lives of both Abram and Nicodemus. Both of these men, Abram and Nicodemus had to leave the old behind and move toward the new possibilities and the promises of God. Abraham and Nicodemus did this so they could assume and put on their new identities. Because of their willingness, the lives of Abram and Nicodemus were forever changed.

God wants for you a new identity. Though I can see it emerging, none of us yet know what it will be.

But I do know for whom it will be. The new identity will be for all of you who are drawn

(...here by God's spirit. God is giving you a new identity as servants of the living God who live in unity as a new community, a community of people who lovingly care for one another.)

(...to this altar rail and receive the body and blood of Christ. The body and blood of Christ will make you all new creations and give you a new identity as servants of the living God who live in unity as a new community, a community of people who lovingly care for one another.

Some people think such love and caring happens in God's heavenly kingdom. Not so! God desires for this community to exist not only in heaven, but today, right here and right now. I don't know where next God will take us, or when or how. As we prepare together for the journey we do well to remember that God will move in our midst while we are on the journey, and that the only requirement to keep on the proper path for the journey is the faith stated as such in "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life."

Beyond this there are no maps or plans to tell us where to go – only to move with faith into the next episode of our enlivened serial with God. So we continue with one another on our journey toward the new identity God is forging in our midst. AMEN.