

The Second Sunday of Lent

February 17, 2008

Genesis 12:1-4a

Psalm 121

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

John 3:1-17

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Nicodemus, a Pharisee with a Greek name. That must be unusual. Apparently, he is what is known as a Hellenized Jew. They were the Jews that were open to foreign, non-traditional ideas and influences, as opposed to the conservatives who saw and knew nothing but Torah, the Law. Those were the Pharisees, in the midst of which is this liberal, Nicodemus. How he became one of them is an absolute mystery.

All of which might explain why Nicodemus seeks out Jesus. Jesus is certainly an object of curiosity, a man with some very new, or perhaps old and forgotten, ideas about the relationship of man and God. Nicodemus is curious about Jesus in an intellectual sort of way.

He comes to Jesus by night. It may be that Nicodemus is a secret believer. It's very nice to think so. However, it might well be that to be seen with Jesus would be embarrassing to a man like Nicodemus. This Jesus is a Galilean Rabbi, a man from the hinterlands, certainly no intellectual. Jesus is no Pharisee, and it may be that Nicodemus thinks Jesus is a bit beneath him. But, then again, there are these reported miracles; Nicodemus calls them "signs." What to make of all that? Jesus is worth a look.

It all starts out well for Nicodemus. He makes a few opening compliments. He really expects to ask a few questions, hear the answers and get a fix on Jesus, categorize him and fit him into a place in Nicodemus' tidy understanding of the world. Then Nicodemus could go home; it should take only a few minutes.

Actually, there's a bit of Nicodemus in all of us. It's not a matter of going through a crisis, not a matter of a loss of faith. We just want to fit Jesus into our lives, into our busy world. Perhaps it's a matter of growing up and recognizing that this is not a tidy world, that there are and will be things beyond our comprehension and control, painful as that may be.

I went through that period of questioning; perhaps we all did. I had a long list of questions that begged answers for me to believe. I probably should reassure you that was long time ago, nothing recent. In retrospect I imagine God was either amused, or perhaps bored, by the same old questions He had been hearing for millennia.

The big question was and is, "How do we fit what Jesus did, his miracles, into our understanding of the realities of this world? How do we live in this world according to the very compelling words of Jesus, the parables and teachings, the Beatitudes?" It's no easy thing.

We can try to reconcile it all by knowing about Jesus; that's what Nicodemus is doing. What happens? Every question is met with not an answer but a statement, a call to faith, not to understanding. Jesus tells him, you feel the wind, you experience it, you don't know or understand it.

We experience Jesus; we come to his presence loaded with questions, and his sheer presence overwhelms us. First comes faith, then comes a wonderful understanding of what faith in that presence means. Faith is a motivator, the power that inspires us to live according to what we have come to understand. What we understand is that a world freed from anger, hatred, violence, and pride is not the

way to the Kingdom of God; it is the Kingdom of God. We are the ones who will bring that kingdom to be.

Nicodemus experienced Jesus. What happened? The Gospel tells us that at the trial of Jesus, it is Nicodemus, one of the Sanhedrin, the council, who protests, "Does our Law judge a man without first learning about him?" It is this Nicodemus who, with Joseph of Arimathea, prepares the corpse of Jesus for burial.

Nicodemus is profoundly changed by knowing the presence of Jesus in his life; so are we all.

In His Holy Name.