

Nic at Night

Some have called this passage the most fascinating encounter in Scripture. Seeker encounters the source. Religion encounters spirituality.

Let's first consider Seeker encounters Source.

Nicodemus is a Pharisee ... he was a very religious man. He was a leader among the religious Jews.

It is night time. He comes in the cloak of darkness, hidden from his peers. He finds Jesus, for whom he had been searching and he says, "We know that you are a teacher who has come from God."

Do you think his words are genuine, or was it flattery, for some devious reason? Was he setting a trap for Jesus? After all, this was a sophisticated, powerful religious authority, sneaking out at night to find this rural preacher! Nicodemus was seeking a private meeting with a man who was fast becoming a threat to organized religion.

Nicodemus tells Jesus that he believes that no one can do the things that Jesus has been seen doing, unless they are in the presence of God. Nicodemus is quite certain that this man has some special connection with the Creator. The seeker encounters the source.

Let's pause for just a moment and consider the relationship between religion and spirituality.

Have you ever heard anyone say - "I'm not religious, I'm spiritual". Some people feel the need to make a distinction. Would you say that this is true for yourself as well?

If Nicodemus had been looking for a religious experience, he could have gone to the synagogue. But he was looking for a spiritual experience. Nicodemus knew that he was in the presence of Spirit of God when he was in the company of Jesus. He had previously heard about and perhaps had even seen some of the things that Jesus had done. There was something very unusual about this man. Nicodemus was drawn to Him.

When it comes to the spiritual it has to do with knowing that there is something beyond the rational, and the logical. When we tap into our spiritual dimension, we start to see and experience things in a different way, things that sometimes we don't understand and can't explain. It takes us out of the dimension in which we usually live.

If I need groceries, I make a list, gather up what I need and head to the grocery store to collect those things ... sometimes our religion is like that. Someone needs help, we go and help them. Something needs funding, we give our money to support that. Our faith requires a living out. Certain behaviours. A certain moral and ethical way of being. Our faith and our religion can become a very functional, transactional experience. It has to do with the good and important elements of mission and ministry. Wonderful, essential things for sure, but not in and of themselves particularly spiritual.

Spiritual is more transcendent. It has to do with being open to nudges.

Spiritual has to do with embracing things we cannot see or touch or

measure. Things we cannot explain in any sort of logical way.

Spiritual has to do with opening ourselves up to wonder, and

possibility, and a sense of awe. Spiritual is connected to the emotional.

It is not anti-intellectual, but it is not restricted by the rigors of logic and

intellectualism.

I believe it was the spiritual that drew Nicodemus to Jesus. Likely he

had been watching him and wondering, and finally got up the courage,

unbeknownst to his colleagues, to find Jesus in the dark of night, and to

have an encounter with him. It was as if he couldn't not seek him out.

Nicodemus opens with these affirming words of adoration, “We know

that you are a teacher, come from God.” It is then that Jesus responds

to him with this non sequitur of an abrupt response, “No one can see

the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Jesus is way

ahead of Nicodemus. He knows what Nicodemus is looking for. So

Jesus moves Nicodemus from the cerebral to the spiritual. Immediately he points to a reality above and beyond the obvious. "You must be born again ..." Again, with his thinking restricted to common, earthly, intellectual dimensions, Nicodemus cannot understand the physics of being born again. How is this physically possible? He is not thinking spiritually. What Jesus was talking about had nothing to do with physics. Jesus was talking about being born of water and of spirit ... born from above. Religion encounters spirituality.

What a night this was for Nicodemus! He comes out of the dark and approaches this man whom he had been watching and hearing about for some time. Jesus had captured Nicodemus' heart, and his imagination. Nicodemus had seen something in Jesus to which he was inextricably drawn. The seeker and the source.

This was the beginning of a new chapter in the spiritual journey of Nicodemus. Jesus was talking about entering the kingdom of God. Entering indicates movement, a journey.

Jesus says, “What is born of flesh is flesh, but what is born of Spirit is spirit.” Born of Spirit with a capital S. Born of God.

The larger reading of the Bible is very clear that we are all on a pilgrimage, a journey, it is not instant arrival. We are all seekers. Trying to find our way to the source. There can be wonderful, defining, life giving spiritual moments on our journey. This meeting with Jesus was a spiritual moment for Nicodemus but there is little doubt that this spiritual intimacy did not last every moment for the rest of his life. It doesn't for any of us. It comes in wonderful flashes.

I remember when our seminary class asked our preaching professor, how we can know God, how can we know where God is, how can we get God to do what we want ... you know ... seek and ye shall find, knock and the door will be open, ask and it shall be given ... Our preaching professor took a quiet, reflective moment and said, “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it. But you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone

who is born of the Spirit." Can you imagine the look on the faces of naive seminarians? We wanted him to define the nature of God ... who He was, how we could identify him in our daily living, how we could request a few favours and miracles from him ... and this is what he gives us ... the wind blows where it chooses???? Not at all satisfying to our rational, logical intellects. We were looking for some black and white. We wanted some religion and he gave us spirit!

What he was saying to us in part was that spirituality is much more than human effort. It is much more than our human brilliance and commitment. Spirituality is more than reason ... it is more than human pursuit of God ... It is about our openness to the movement of God, the breath of God, the Spirit of God.

We never know how this nighttime meeting between Nicodemus and Jesus ended. There is no mention of Nicodemus again, at least for a while.

Just like this encounter with Nicodemus is one of the most famous encounters in the Bible...right up there with Zachaeus, Mary and Martha, the woman at the well, the devil - this passage in John contains one of the most well known verses of the New Testament.

"For God so loved the world.....go on....how does it go.....that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life'.....God sent his son into the world so that the world might be saved by him....and so that you and I might be carriers of that same light into the dark corners in this world. That is the gift and the significance of our ministry and mission, living that out in our daily lives.

These few verses are the heart and soul of the Christian faith - the heart of the matter. Notice how the things of God begin and end in love. For God so loved the world. God gives the gift which is most costly to give....his Son. Whoever believes, lives in the spirit of that love on earth, and beyond.

Religion and spirituality

Seeker and source

All 4, essential ingredients to the Christian faith.

All 4 essential to the journey.

God bless you on your journey, as you shine His light into the lives of others.

Amen