



C. Kutz-Marks

The Man Who Came By Night

Lent 2, a, February 17, 2008
John 3:1-17

See if you can stretch your imagination far enough to see in your mind's eye a bold headline on tomorrow morning's Austin American Statesman

James Dobson Becomes Muslim:

James Clayton Dobson personal religious counselor to American political leaders for decades and Christian evangelist extraordinaire, has in his own words, “graduated from Christianity, into the fuller faith of Islam.”

“Dobson who is chairman of the board of [Focus on the Family](#), a nonprofit organization he founded in 1977. In this function, he produces the daily radio program [Focus on the Family](#), which is broadcast in more than a dozen languages and on over 7,000 stations worldwide, and heard daily by more than 220 million people in 164 countries. He is an [evangelical Christian](#) with conservative views on theology and politics. He was recently named "The Most Influential Evangelical Leader in America" by [Christianity Today](#) magazine, and many have seen him as the successor to evangelical leaders [Billy Graham](#), [Jerry Falwell](#) and [Pat Robertson](#)”ⁱ

“Dr. Dobson, who will be renouncing his church membership in a ceremony later today, as he formally joins himself to a mosque that will be

his new spiritual home, not far from his Colorado Springs residence. He has been holding secret evening meetings with the Iman, the religious leader of that bustling mosque for several weeks, and is ready now to take this new direction in his personal development.”

“Dr. Dobson apologizes for the anguish that he knows this will cause for many Christians who have seen him as model and guide, but he encourages them to follow his lead and become Muslim as well.”

Can you imagine such a story??

Now, this is just an Islamist’s pipedream today, but if such a thing should happen, it would be no stranger than the incident our Gospel lesson today hints at.

Rabbi Nicodemus was one of the exceptional few.... one of the 70 highest Jewish religious leaders of his time. His was a judge in the Israeli Supreme Court of the time.ⁱⁱ

No one in their right mind would have expected someone who had clearly devoted his life to the service of God through Judaism like Nicodemus had, would suddenly up and turn his back on it. And why? To follow an uneducated Galilean, the homeless, crazed-prophet, son of a carpenter. Had others known of the night visit in this morning’s story, Jerusalem would have been buzzing.

And we should be clear that we don’t really know either how it all turned out. Nicodemus here in the 3rd chapter comes to meet Jesus and hears the call to be “born from above.” He appears briefly in the 7th chapter where he defends Jesus from a hasty judgment in the Sanhedrin. And then in the 19th Chapter of the Gospel of John, after his crucifixion, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea obtain Jesus’ body and put him in the tomb...without really saying whether Nicodemus had become a follower of Jesus, or

whether he was just fascinated by him. But Nicodemus showed up then with about 100 lbs of myrrh & aloe, an enormous gift, a sign of some import.

But it is not so hard to imagine that underneath that regal veneer of righteous propriety, that Judge Nicodemus might still have had a seeker's heart. And when we look around us, it seems that we are A NATION of spiritual seekers. We are hungry to learn about the life of the spirit, although many hesitate to translate that hunger into institutional allegiance. These say, "I am a spiritual person, but not a religious person." Or, "I worship God on my own. I'll have nothing to do with institutional religion

Spiritual seekers. Afraid of commitment through a traditional approach to God. Wanting to custom make a pattern of belief and behavior. Mahatma Gandhi said half a century ago: "it is because we have at the present moment everybody claiming the right of conscience without going through any discipline whatsoever that there is so much untruth being delivered to a bewildered world."

More true today even, than then.

But while many of our neighbors who call themselves seekers, are unwilling to go through any discipline... our friend Nicodemus had gone through every discipline, every educational opportunity, every traditional practice. Like Saul of Tarsus who would later follow Jesus by converting from Pharisaic Judaism, it seems that they had experienced the heights and depths of Judaism, and found it somehow wanting. Jesus provided that "something more." Saul, then Paul, said in .Philippians 3

:4 even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more:

5 circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee;

6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

7 Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.

One wonders if Nicodemus might also have felt that same unmet need...

In order to meet Jesus without causing a stir, Nicodemus was coming under the cover of darkness. The Man Who Came by Darkness. While it's often said – and it is no doubt true- that Nicodemus meets Jesus at night to avoid being seen in this illicit liaison, an alternate interpretation is also instructive. The rabbis had taught that the Torah – the first 5 books of our Bible- was best studied at night when it was quiet and the distractions of the day had subsided. So Nicodemus uses his precious study time to expand his search beyond the standard texts. In this view, Jesus himself becomes the book into which Nicodemus delves, mining every word for wisdom and understanding.

So he approaches Jesus:

2 "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

3 Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

Though his words may seem sharp, it is clear that Jesus receives Nicodemus as a pilgrim, a sincere religious seeker. Somehow Jesus knows that Nicodemus is willing to risk leaving behind the old truth as he has known it in order to explore something new. Jesus invites him into a new realm of insight, and Jesus takes Nicodemus' searching seriously even as

Jesus pushes him far beyond his comfort zone, pushing him towards conversion.

And the common thread of such conversions, of Paul's conversion, of my conversion and probably yours, too, is that there is usually some sudden shift that causes a clean break, a fresh start from the old way of living to the new.

What Jesus is saying to Nicodemus is something like this: "If you are really interested in what I'm doing, the first thing to realize is that you have to start all over again. You can't inch your way into the Kingdom of God by tinkering a little bit here or a little bit there with your self. It isn't just a matter of being a little more disciplined, or giving a little more to the Church or to the United Way than you do, or praying a little more often. It's a whole different way of life. It's like kicking a drug habit, you've got to do it cold-turkey-all the way-and the withdrawal symptoms are like the trauma of being born again."

It was the same message Jesus had for the rich young ruler: ". . . sell all that you have", completely change your outlook on and orientation toward life. That was more of a clean break than the rich young ruler wanted to make because he had great possessions.

On the other hand Zacchaeus, the tax collector from Jericho, made that clean break.

And when you stop and think about it, it is unfortunate that the phrase "born again" or "born from above" has been so largely identified with, and reduced to, experiencing a single type of emotional religious experience, because it is easy to see that this rebirth involves different things for different people.

>The rich young ruler needed to make a clean break with his financial successes & his supreme self-confidence;

> Others will need to make a clean break with the opposite: their senses of guilt or failure.

> Some people, such as, perhaps, Nicodemus, need to make a clean break with their religious ideas.

> Some people need to make a clean break with their current goals & then to set new ones.

> Some people need to make a clean break with their circumstances & their circle of friends who bring them morally down.ⁱⁱⁱ

Being ready to follow God's leading sincerely and faithfully means making a clean break with anything and with everything that interferes with our obedience to God.

One of the most basic experiences of the faithful is seeing time and again how love, God's love & God's love through other human beings, how love has a way of saving those who seemed lost. You know our son, David, off in NYC studying poetry and our daughter, Marie, is currently studying poetry in Kalamazoo. Marie's boyfriend, Sean, is serving in the Army in Baghdad, but Thursday was Valentine's Day and with little gestures of love that he arranged long distance, Sean truly made her day, thousands of miles away. So the Kutz-Marks' thoughts about poetry and love this time of year might quite naturally turn to that great love story of literature, the story of Elizabeth Barrett.

Elizabeth was 40 years old, had been sickly with a serious lung condition for 25 years, and was essentially living the life of a secluded hermit. Having read her poetic work, she was one day sought out by a visitor, a certain Robert Browning. He walked into her life. They fell in

love, and were secretly married because her father would never have approved. A few years later, she gave birth to their son at age 43. And it was the start of a whole new life for Elizabeth Barrett Browning after a time when most people would have assumed her fate had long since frozen in a state of dissatisfaction.

But that story of new starts is everywhere, isn't it? Every book of the Bible tells of rebirths, new found freedoms. Can't you hear it when you hear the names: Sarah giving at age 100; Moses before the Red Sea; David victorious over Goliath; Elizabeth & Mary rejoicing together in the power of God at promise of their sons. New starts, every one.

And some blessed times, those fresh starts come in a vision that lasts & lasts. The classic film *The Horse's Mouth* tells the story of a Bohemian painter who lives on a houseboat. There is one scene where a young admirer of the painter asks why and how he became an artist. The man looks through a broken window as though at something far away and says, "One time I saw a painting by the artist, Matisse. In that moment I was stunned and suddenly saw the world in color for the first time. God skinned my eyes; I became a different man; it was like a conversion."

Whether or not this morning's passage is an understated case of Nicodemus' conversion, or simply the tale of a man who came close to the brink, but couldn't enter, the message is clear enough in its meaning for you and me. "For God so loved the world.... That everyone who believes in him shall not perish." God's great desire is to "skin" our eyes that we might see;

To set us free;

To provide conversion after conversion until we can clearly see the Kingdom of God!

ⁱFrom http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Dobson

ⁱⁱ The title of this sermon (and it was also used by Clarence McCartney in his book *Chariots of Fire*) and some elements of it are attributable to a sermon by Dr. William K. Quick February 28, 1999 and as found on the Day 1 website. Further aspects of the sermon are reliant on an article by Patricia Farris who at one time was senior minister of First United Methodist in Santa Monica, California. I don't know if she is still there, nor do I recall the title or date or journal in which spotted this information.

ⁱⁱⁱ From Quick's article.