

## Nicodemus

Have you ever had the experience of something that changed your life, only to realize that it meant you really had to change your life?

It was like that for me when I met Jesus. I met him three times. I must tell you about him. And how my life was changed forever.

You see this box? This is what I used to think God was like. How I grew up thinking about God. I was taught that when it comes right down to it, the laws of God are not that difficult. There are 613 of them. And they all fit into this box.

My name is Nicodemus. And I am - or at least I was - a member of the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court among the Jewish people. We were priests, Pharisees and scribes of the law. If there was an instruction from God as to how our people should live, we were the ones to know. We knew the law as well as God did.

The whole of Jewish society was to adapt itself to what was in this box. And this box has sides and a bottom line and a top that can be closed, if the need arises. And it was our job to go after those who stepped outside of it.

I lived inside that box. I breathed its stale air for most of my life. I had no room for imagination. I had contempt for those who had one. There was a very narrow slit in this box for any air to move. That, for me and my brothers in the Sanhedrin, was where God lived. Inside a box that was no bigger than our narrow imaginations.

And so it was with that mindset that I went to see Jesus. I must admit I was intrigued by the man. He had become a force to be reckoned with. People were starting to listen to him, and not to the Pharisees. He was challenging the authority of the religious right. Unleashing a dangerous imagination into the people.

What was he really preaching? I wanted to know! Was he really a threat? We needed to know. After all, the Romans had given us some considerable authority, to keep our people in line, so that they would not be a threat to the state. And if Jesus was stirring up unrest, putting ideas into their heads, then he was a threat to Rome, and because he was a Jew, our necks would be on the line if he got into trouble, and we had done nothing to stop him.

I went by night. On my own. I went with some confidence. With sure knowledge that I could find him out, outwit the man and straighten him out. Clip his wings. Bring him back into the box.

“Rabbi,” I said, giving him the idea that I respected him. I would flatter him. “Rabbi, I know 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.” I didn’t know what to expect, except that it was not what I got.

Jesus says to me, “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.” Huh. What kind of an answer is that? You can’t fit that into a box.

He must be mad! Obviously the man can't think in a straight line. He doesn't know anything about the realm of God. And he knows nothing about having babies.

"How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can you enter a second time into your mother's womb and be born?" There, I thought, that's got him. He can't wriggle out of this one!

But here's what he says to me. "No one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the spirit. Don't be astonished when I say to you, You must be born from above. 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."

"How can these things be?", I asked.

Then Jesus had the last word... "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

What was I to understand? I had to admit I had no categories left in which to talk to Jesus. I realized I was a lawyer talking to a mystic. A fundamentalist talking with a poet.

I stopped talking then, and all I could do was listen. Dumbstruck. Jesus was wandering dangerously into the wild and unexpected territory of the Spirit, into the unknown. And I had wanted to rope him in. I knew how to follow a road map. I did not know my way in the world of mystery - a world of risky faith and an unboxed God. And I did not know whether I wanted Jesus to lead me there.

You see this cup? It's like the one that contained all that I knew about God. It was already full, or so I thought. But then Jesus just kept pouring more and more water into it until it was cascading down the sides! There was so much there that I could barely imagine how I could ever get it back inside.

Jesus was talking about God - but in a way that I had never dared to imagine. My old understandings were no good any more. I knew that. Jesus had unchained my God for me. The box, the chalice, the walls, the traditions, the customs of religious life - they would no longer suffice. I knew that.

But what on earth could I do? There was a painful irony here for me.

Here I was, among the most learned of scholars, arguing with this Galilean peasant! How could I have expected him to change my faith forever?

I walked away from Jesus that day. My head spinning. My world turned upside down. I knew that I had a choice to make. I had to take this crazy poet seriously and risk losing everything that I knew about God, and risk losing my job and my status, and start all over again,.

Or I could go back, and tell no one what had happened, and pretend to myself that it never did.

Have you ever had that kind of choice to make?

Don't you wish sometimes you could keep the world from getting too interesting and go back to times when the world was less complex? It really is easier to go back. But sometimes the wild winds of God just won't leave you alone.

I went back. I left Jesus and I went back to the Sanhedrin. I went on as if nothing had happened. This encounter with Jesus, this troubling word about the power of the Spirit unchaining us from our false gods. I let it fade.

But then something happened to force it again into my consciousness. It was some time later. Passover in Jerusalem. We never booked our holidays during Passover. Always a spirit of restlessness in the air. Some minor rebellion to suppress. Some fanatic to turn over to the Romans for quick justice. We could not risk letting this stuff get out of hand.

Word came that a parade of people had been waving palm branches and throwing their cloaks on the ground for a peasant preacher from Galilee riding in to Jerusalem on a donkey. Claims were made that he was the Messiah. That he worked miracles. That he could preach better than any of the priests. I had a sense that I was in trouble.

I'll never forget the moment he was brought before us - for the trial. Caiaphas the high priest brought us into the council chamber and asked us to interrogate the man. I couldn't look him in the eye. I don't know whether he recognized me or not. He didn't give me away. Some of my brothers spat on him, one slapped him across the face. He was a broken man. Humiliated. But full of spirit inside.

I did not ask him any questions. I had heard his answers before. I knew the others would not dare to let his "free God" blow among them. They could not allow his light to enter their darkness. There was too much at stake.

I heard the man given over to Pilate for sentencing. I heard the crowd turn on him, and call for the release of Barabbas, a man more to their liking for a violent revolution. I heard the soldiers dragging him off. I could imagine the crucifixion. I could feel it in my own bones. For I was dying there, too.

In the darkness that covered the earth, in the middle of the day, as Jesus died, I remembered the night I had come to see him, dragging my box of God-stuff. And how he had kicked down the walls of my understanding. And told me to find a God who lived in the wind. And told me to be born again.

It took me that long to know what he meant. I took off my robes. Forever. Stepped out of the Sanhedrin. I went to find my friend Joseph of Arimathea, another ex-member of the Sanhedrin. I had heard that he had, in secret, come to be a follower of Jesus. I poured out my story to him, we confessed our complicity in silence at passively watching the trial. And of our love for the one who had died.

Then Joseph and I went to Pilate, got permission to have the body, and laid it in Joseph's own tomb in his garden.

I stand before you today to tell you that I will no longer live in fear. I tell you that you need not either. I tell you, because I know, that God does not live in a box. God is in the

wind. God is loose - everywhere in the world. And God is in every person who is set free, who has found a new birth. Go, and live in God.....

Your faithful brother,

Nicodemus