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“The Morning After”
Trinity-Anjou Pastoral Charge
March 12, 2017

Read Sherman

Scriptures: Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3:1-17

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be a witness, O God, to your Way of love, justice and faithful walking with us. Amen.

My name is Nicodemus. But then, you all know that. Everyone who's anyone in this town, around this temple, knows me. After all, I'm a Pharisee. Yeah, that's right. I've got a position around here, although I don't mean to be arrogant. It's just - that I've done my time around here. Worked my way up the ranks. God has been good to me - giving me a faith in Yahweh - O how I love him! How great are God's works - just look at our splendid temple, this splendid city. We Jews aren't doing too bad right now, under Herod, our king. Oh yes, and under Rome.

Well, that's another story, but I musn't say that too out loud. The walls have ears, don't you know.

Yes, I have a position here. I think my peers respect me. My family are secure in every way. So you may wonder why I'm out here, so late at night. To be honest, I'm kind of wondering that too. Normally at this time of night I'm at home with my spouse, reading scripture by the fire. Our door would already be locked, and I wouldn't have a care in the world. But, since this last Passover, I don't know what's got into me. Or rather, who's gotten into me.

Were you in Jerusalem last week when Jesus tore through the temple, casting out the money changers and the pigeon sellers? I couldn't imagine him doing it even though I'd heard him teaching all that week before. Yes, he has a radical understanding of God. As a rabbi from the countryside, I can understand how he finds God to be so immanent in everything - and even everyone. To be honest, we Jerusalem priests spend far too much time in the temple, worrying about making the proper sacrifices, using the right words and gestures - making sure there's enough blood to appease Yahweh's anger at our sinfulness. We can forget Yahweh's simple kindness and love. Jesus captures that about God so well! His eyes, his voice, his whole being positively sparkles with love for God when he speaks. And the stories of the wonders he has produced! How could I not go to him to find out more, yes, even under the cover of darkness.

I admit, doing so was a bit risky. Jesus is not making himself popular among my temple colleagues. Some are beginning to take offense at the authority with which he teaches. They are jealous of the crowds he pulls in to hear him. The Chief Priests see an upstart in the making; some claim that this man is the Messiah, after all! A rabbi from nowhere'sville Nazareth! It's too preposterous. And yet, I wanted to hear more, to learn more. His teaching quickened my heart in the strangest way, making me question my own approach.

I knew where he was staying, in the upper guest room of a devout merchant from Galilee. I'd known that merchant for years and he was a crusty old sod who was ever so tight with his money. But then, suddenly, he had changed. Last year he was among the top donors to the temple funds for widows and orphans. When I asked him what changed, he told me he'd come across Jesus at a crossroads once and stopped to hear him preach. Right there and then, Jesus convinced him that hoarding his fortune was against God's law. His closed fist suddenly opened, and now he told me business was even better than ever!

But I digress! Suddenly, there Jesus was before me. Even though he probably thought I was an enemy, or a spy, he received me so warmly. I asked him the questions I had. I just wanted to know how he does the things he does. Miracles. Teach Yahweh's laws in a way that melts your heart rather than get your back up. He kept talking to me about the kingdom of God like it was a real place. The key to get there, or at least to see it, was to be born from above. I know it was stupid of me to ask whether someone who's already old could go back into his mother's womb, but I couldn't resist. I got what he was aiming at. Only, I didn't know what to do about it.

You see, I wanted that spark that Jesus had. I wanted my Torah teaching to be electric, to have original thoughts and insights that had people scratching their heads in recognition. Yes, here is the living God, crackling off the pages of our scrolls as if alive and new and fresh. I wanted the new birth in a new kingdom Jesus was offering - but what would my friends say? If the Chief Priests found out, I could be labeled an upstart like Jesus was being labeled. What about my position? What about my family's security? Jesus spoke of the winds of God blowing about in a most unpredictable fashion, and, well, I admit it, my life and faith had become wholly conventional. I don't like surprises! And yet, Jesus' understanding of God excites me! And, it even scares me.

Now that the morning is coming I realize I can't hide in the dark any longer. I knew I couldn't stay with Jesus and his followers. I had to go back. I have to go back, to my life, my work, my family. To this system of sacrifice that literally is the world for me and everyone I know who thinks about who God is and what God wants. I have to go back, and yet I know I've changed. I can never read Torah the same again. I'll always hear Jesus' voice in my head, teaching me to listen for the wind that comes like a breath. A new realm being born out of simple kindness. Radical mercy and forgiveness of sins - just like that. Will I be able to function? Will anyone question me if they see a spark in me that wasn't there before? I honestly don't know the answer to my questions but Yahweh will help me. All I know is that as this morning rises, I can face the it knowing God better as Jesus knows God.

Who knows? Maybe one day God's spirit wind will breathe new life into all our temple teachings? When and if it does, I hope I'll be brave enough to own it and claim it for myself. Amen.

Sermon was followed with playing The Morning After, sung by Maureen McGovern (see link)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= KC1pLzFftU>