

## LENT: A TIME TO JOURNEY TO THE CROSS

**Fourth Sunday in Lent**

**March 22, 2009**

**Numbers 21:4-9**

**Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22**

**Ephesians 2:1-10**

**John 3:14-21**

### Conversations by Night

Some scholars have said that the Jewish leader, Nicodemus, came to Jesus by night because he did not want others in his rabbinical group to know that he had a profound interest in Jesus, who was considered by many of the religious leaders of his day, a rabble-rouser.

Yet, as I re-read this week's Gospel pericope, I was amazed at what one can discover by coming to Jesus by night. Puzzled by Jesus' exhortation that one needs to "be born from above before you can see God's kingdom" (John 3:3b, *GNT*), Nicodemus struggles with very much the same questions we wrestle with: How can we truly know God? And having known God, how can we be assured of eternal life?

Jesus not only explains the "new birth" to Nicodemus, but he gives him a crash course on how God's Spirit operates. It is clear from his responses that Nicodemus does not get it. Was it because Jesus, the master teacher, was not clear? Heaven forbid! Nicodemus came with preconceived notions about Jesus and Jesus' power. He wanted to understand it, but he could not let go of those ideas he held, nor could he wrap his head around the fact that God's Spirit, like the wind, cannot be logically explained because one does not "know where it comes from or where it is going" (John 3:8b, *GNT*).

It wasn't that Nicodemus did not believe the things that Jesus was explaining; it may just have been that he needed something or someone in whom to anchor his belief. He was approaching the things of God from an intellectual perspective, and Jesus reminded him that the things of God cannot always be explained by way of reasoning.

It was a difficult lesson. Jesus, then, launched into foretelling not only his own death, but the eternal salvation that humankind would inherit by his being crucified. "The Son of Man must be lifted up, just as the metal snake was lifted up by Moses in the desert. Then everyone who has faith in the Son of Man will have eternal life" (John 3:14, 15, *GNT*). [See also Numbers 21:4-9]

In effect, humankind's salvation would come when Christ was "lifted up" to be crucified and "exalted" by God for carrying out God's will in obedience. What follows next is a classic Bible passage that everyone knows and often says by rote—John 3:16—"God

loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life” (*GNT*).

Wow! One of the greatest promises that God offers was given to a man who came to Jesus under the cloak of night in a one-on-one conversation filled with questions. The discourse that ensues gives us insight into Jesus’ mission and the issues that confounded this learned rabbi, Nicodemus. What did we learn from Nicodemus’ queries and Jesus’ responses? Did we learn that we were once “spiritually dead in our disobedience,” but that God “brought us to life with Christ” (Ephesians 2:4, 5, *GNT*)? Did we learn we should “thank the LORD for his constant love” and “for the wonderful things he did for [us]” (Psalm 107:21, *GNT*)? And, what questions do we ourselves have for Jesus?

Nicodemus had his conversation by night, but the Bible assures us that we can approach God’s throne boldly at any time (Hebrews 4:16). The passage does not tell us how the conversation ended, but we know that Nicodemus’ encounter with Jesus, the true Light of the world, did not end that night. We see him again with Joseph of Arimathea, lovingly embalming the body of Jesus (John 19:39) after his crucifixion.

It all started with conversations by night...

This week’s Reflection was prepared by Dorette Saunders who serves on the staff of the American Bible Society as Senior Editor in the Education Unit of the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship.

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**This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in: Tunisia** –with prayers for the political leaders, for Christians and expatriates, that despite the challenges, they will grow in faith and be able to worship freely, for the new translation of the New Testament and that it will launch church growth; **Morocco**–with prayers for the production and launch of the first New Testament, for permission to import Scriptures in other languages including Arabic and French, for the government as it seeks to improve the social and economic environment; **Algeria**–with thanksgiving for the growing demand for God’s holy Word and the thirst of the people for the Scriptures; with prayers that the Holy Spirit will protect and strengthen the Bible Society staff and continue to keep them faithful, and that many people will continue to receive the Scriptures.

**Activity Corner: “Conversations by Night and Day”**

Supplies needed: Bible; heart stickers, blank “Thinking of You” cards (or make your own); pens or pencils; crayons or markers.

Write the Bible passage John 3:16 on one side of the inside of the card. Write a personal note of encouragement from you on the other side. Decorate it with the heart stickers (or draw your own using crayons or markers). Deliver your cards to a nursing home or senior center. A few days later, follow up your card with a telephone conversation with a resident at a nursing home or senior center.