

## CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE BEST KIND

### 1) The Religious Leader

It was in 1977 that the film, “**Close Encounters of the Third Kind**,” probed the mystery of the possibility of extra-terrestrial life. It was astronomer and UFO researcher, J. Allen Hynek who originally coined the term “close encounter” in order to describe the experience of those who witnessed an unidentified flying object within the range of up to 500 feet. As I understand it, a close encounter of the first kind involved a visual sighting. A close encounter of the second kind is one in which there is a physical trace or impact. A close encounter of the third kind is one in which an animated creature is actually present. How many of you have seen that film? It’s very hard for me to believe that it was released in 1977!!

Be that as it may, it is this concept of a “close encounter” that forms the backdrop for our Lenten focus this year. Using the Gospel of John as our resource, we are considering several of the close encounters that Jesus had with certain individuals in the day to day course of his ministry. These individuals reflect a rather diverse cross section of humanity, from the top of the socio-economic ladder to the bottom, both male and female, Jew and Gentile.

In our first “installment” of this Lenten season, we focus our attention upon the “close encounter” that Jesus had with Nicodemus early in the Gospel of John. Keep in mind that the writer of this gospel weaves his tale with the imagery of light and darkness, with the metaphor sight and blindness. Throughout this narrative, the subtle and, at times, not so subtle message is that, in Jesus, a light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it. In a world that, often lives in darkness, often walks in blindness, Jesus offers the invitation to **see** all that God is doing in and through his words and witness. Jesus offers sight not only in the physical sense, but also, in the spiritual sense.

In our lesson this morning, it Nicodemus who comes to Jesus at night. Now, given the literary context that I just sketched out, it is important to note that this is not a fact to be overlooked. Why does John tell us that this conversation took place at night? Two reasons come to mind. It may have been that Nicodemus did not want any of his colleagues to see him talking with Jesus who was already posing a threat to the religious establishment. He would have a lot of explaining to do. But it is also important to remember the implied message here from the writer: Nicodemus, well respected member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling religious body among the Jews, was living in darkness. He could not see clearly the light of God that was shining in Jesus.

But to his credit, Nicodemus was aware of the fact that there might be more to the presence and power of God than what he and his colleagues had recognized. And so it is that he comes to Jesus at night, affirming that God indeed must be at work within him because no one could possibly do the things that he had done unless God was a part of the equation.

Jesus, however, ignores the flattery and gets right to the point. **“No one can see the Kingdom of God,”** Jesus said, **“without being born from above.”**

Now, this seems, to our hearing, as almost brutally direct. There are no pleasantries here, not comments about the weather or local gossip. No, just this simple, unadorned teaching that stressed the importance of being “born from above.” In reading this text, we cannot help but wonder why. Why this direct, succinct, no-nonsense approach?

My guess is that Jesus was so familiar with the mindset and practice of the religious leaders that he was aware of the fact that, so often, they could be so bound up with the detailed demands of keeping the law—and making sure that others kept the law—that they could find themselves being spiritually suffocated by their duties and responsibilities. Jesus understood that “institutional religion” can become its own worst enemy when it assumes the duty and responsibility of playing the part of God—that is, of actually thinking that the vitality of faith is primarily dependent upon one’s own initiative and direction.

In other words, these religious leaders took themselves, and their role, pretty seriously—in fact, too seriously. Jesus reminds them that ultimately, it is the Spirit of God that ushers in the reign of God. **“No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”**

Nicodemus, however, doesn’t understand that Jesus is speaking metaphorically. Instead, he interprets his message literally. **“How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”**

Jesus then tries to clarify by using two metaphors to refer to the Spirit of which he was speaking. He suggested that the Spirit was like water—water that refreshes and renews. He then suggests that the Spirit is like the wind that enlivens and empowers. You don’t know where it is coming from and you don’t know where it is going, but you can hear it, you can feel it and you can experience its presence. This Spirit, says Jesus, is a mystery that is initiated by God.

Nicodemus, however, still doesn’t get it. “How can these things be?” he wants to know. Jesus is astonished—**“You are a teacher of Israel and yet, do not understand these things?”**

At this point, the conversation comes to an end and Nicodemus, the wise and well respected member of the religious establishment—this leader among leaders—is still in the dark, unable to see, unable to grasp the nature of the kingdom that Jesus is describing.

Nicodemus, however, fades from view and we are left to ponder the significance of this encounter between Jesus and a prominent religious leader. This, after all, is not exactly the ending that we might have scripted had we the opportunity to compose this gospel. It would have been tempting to script a dramatic scene in which, suddenly, the eyes of Nicodemus are opened to the meaning of Jesus’ metaphor and he “sees” in a way that he never did before. And then, just to add an appropriate finishing touch, he goes off boldly to

his fellow Pharisees and helps them to see as well. Now, that's a conclusion that would provide some inspiration!

**But it is not the conclusion that John provides. Nicodemus simply disappears from the narrative and we are left to wonder whether or not he experienced any change at all.** A careful review of John's gospel provides two clues that would suggest that Nicodemus was, in fact, changed by this conversation, that although he came to Jesus under the cover of darkness, he would, eventually, begin to see the kingdom that Jesus pointed to and would eventually begin to understand just what it meant to be born from above.

One of those clues is found in **John 7:50**, a verse in which Nicodemus defends Jesus' right to a fair hearing when his religious colleagues are ready to sentence him to death without a hearing. There's not a lot of evidence there, but enough to provide a hint that Nicodemus was still convinced that God was at work in Jesus.

The second clue is found in the **nineteenth chapter** of John's Gospel—**verse 39**. Here the writer tells us that one of those who anointed the body of Jesus after the crucifixion is none other than this same Nicodemus. Here is still more tangible evidence that Nicodemus was growing in his understanding of who Jesus was and his willingness to offer his allegiance to him—even though it was politically risky to do so.

There us, I believe, enough evidence here to suggest that the darkness in Nicodemus' life was beginning to fade as the dawn of God's light began to take hold within him. Where once he had been blind, he was now beginning to see.

**As we consider this close encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus, it is important for us to ask ourselves a few questions:** In what ways might our own institutional connection or allegiance keep us in darkness? In what ways might our own rules and regulations, our own habits and traditions make us blind to the way that God is at work in our world? And what might it mean for us to be "born from above?"

It was note Psychiatrist, Carl Jung who once observed, "**One of the main functions of organized religion is to protect people against a direct experience of God.**" At first thought, it doesn't seem to make sense. How could the church possibly protect us from the direct experience of God?

As I understand Jung's intent, I think that he is suggesting that the practices of organized religion can sometimes be used to soften God's voice and soothe God's demands. It can be used to create a faith that is comfortable and convenient, rather than relevant and demanding. It can be used to merely talk the talk without feeling the need to walk the walk. It can be used to merely go through the ritualistic motions of faith without being caught up in the deeper movement of faith. It can be used to shield us from a direct encounter with the God who has no interest in our pretense and our posturing...the God who asks for nothing less than our very selves.

Nicodemus, you see, knew all about pretense and posturing. He knew about the details of keeping the law and its 613 demands. He knew all about "playing church." But he also knew that it wasn't enough to satisfy his longing for the Presence of God and the experience of the Holy. He wanted a real face to face, heart to

heart encounter with God and it was this desire that caused him to seek out Jesus under the cover of darkness.

He was, to be sure, a bit dense when it came to understanding Jesus' message about being born from above. His literal mind couldn't quite grasp the metaphorical truth that Jesus offered. He didn't quite understand what it meant to be "born from above." But, to his credit, he didn't back down. He didn't give up. He kept asking questions and he kept pursuing a course of faith that would, in time, lead to his own growth and ability to truly see...to truly experience the living, vital faith that Jesus offered. In time, Nicodemus would come to understand what it meant to be "born from above" because he actually experienced it firsthand.

There is, I believe, an important lesson here for the contemporary church—for those of us who are invested in organized religion in our own day. **The story of Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus is one that reminds us of the critical importance of an experience with God that takes us beyond the duties and details of rituals and regulations that so easily become ends in and of themselves.** There is something more—so much more—to a faith that is alive and vital!

A life filled with the purpose and passion of God is a life that is always in the never ending process of being born all over again. What this church—what every church—needs is a continual reliance upon the Spirit of God that cleanses like water, that refreshes like the wind, that moves within us, challenging, changing and channeling our witness for the work that God calls us to.

My prayer for you...for me...for our life together is that we will know, not just with our heads, but with our very hearts, what it means to be born again and again and again. Amen!