

A Full Embrace?
A Lent 2 Sermon
John 3:1-17
Sunday, February 17, 2008
by Dr. Frank Trotter

When young John Ames, the narrator of Marilynne Robinson's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *Gilead*, is 12 years old, his father takes him on a long journey to find the grave of his grandfather who had wandered away from the town of Gilead several years before. When word comes that the old man has died in a neighboring state, the two set off to tend to his resting place.

When they finally find the neglected grave down a dusty Kansas road, they spend the rest of a long, hot day getting it in order. Young John would always remember that day. "When we finished," he would recall years later, "my father sat down on the ground beside his father's grave. He stayed there for a good while, plucking at little whiskers of straw that still remained on it, fanning himself with his hat. I think he regretted that there was nothing more for him to do. Finally he got up and brushed himself off, and we stood there together with our miserable clothes all damp and our hands all dirty from the work, and the first crickets rasping and the flies really beginning to bother and the birds crying out the way they do when they're about ready to settle for the night, and my father bowed his head and began to pray, remembering his father to the Lord, and also asking the Lord's pardon, and his father's as well."¹

As John stands there hearing the older man pray for the Lord's pardon, and his grandfather's as well, he has no clear idea of what a painful and difficult moment this is for his father. He does not yet know how much dysfunction and separation there have been between his father and grandfather. But as his father prays for pardon, the boy, on the verge of manhood, seems to gain wisdom beyond his years and wonders if these two stubborn, angry men in his life had reconciled before death took the older of them away.

As he holds his father's hand throughout an impossibly long prayer, John suddenly realizes that night is falling all around them even as the daylight seems to be fading in the west. "I tried to keep my eyes closed," he would recall later when he, too, has become an old man, "but after a while I had to

¹ Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2004), 14-15.

look around a little. And this is something I remember very well. At first I thought I saw the sun setting in the east; I knew where east was, because the sun was just over the horizon when we got there that morning. Then I realized that what I saw was a full moon rising just as the sun was going down. Each of them was standing on its edge, with the most wonderful light between them. It seemed as if you could touch it, as if there were palpable currents of light passing back and forth, or as if there were great skeins of light suspended between them. I wanted my father to see it, but I knew I'd have to startle him out of his prayer, and I wanted to do it the best way, so I took his hand and kissed it. And then I said, 'Look at the moon.' And he did. They seemed to float on the horizon for quite a long time, I suppose because they were both so bright you couldn't get a clear look at them. And that grave, and my father and I, were exactly between them, which seemed amazing to me at the time, since I hadn't given much thought to the nature of the horizon."²

For Marilynne Robinson, the author of *Gilead*, nighttime is filled with possibilities both positive and negative.

Biblical scholar Gail O'Day, who teaches on the faculty at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta (one of our United Methodist seminaries), points out that the opening verses in the well-known story of Nicodemus' nighttime visit to Jesus "present both positive and negative images of Nicodemus. On the positive side, Nicodemus, a Jewish leader..., seeks out Jesus. To seek Jesus...is one of the first acts of discipleship in [the gospel of] John. On the negative side, however, Nicodemus hides his seeking under the cloak of night... This reference to the time of Nicodemus's visit is neither an incidental detail nor an attempt at historical verisimilitude. Rather, it provides a clue to the significance of this story for the Fourth Evangelist. 'Night'...is used metaphorically in the Fourth Gospel to represent separation from the presence of God."³

This famous visit tells of an intense conversation between Jesus and a very powerful and well-respected member of the Jerusalem hierarchy. Indeed, it would have been advantageous to Jesus and his followers to have such a man as a member of their loosely-knit collection of believers. But Jesus

² Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2004), 14-15.

³ Gail O'Day, "The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 548. Dr. O'Day is Professor of Homiletics at the Candler School of Theology, Emory University, in Atlanta, Georgia.

does not make it easy for Nicodemus. When the visitor asks for a pragmatic understanding of what it means to believe that Jesus does, in fact, come from God, Jesus gives him oblique, non-linear answers. “Very truly, I tell you,” Jesus tells him, “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Nicodemus doesn't get it. “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a mother's womb for a second time?” Jesus doesn't make it easier. “Didn't you hear me? No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit... 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.” Nicodemus shakes his head and says, “I don't get it. How can these things be?”

There are many of us today who are similarly puzzled by what it means to be born from above, to be born of water and the Spirit. Perhaps that's our fault in the main line denominations for being reluctant to talk about the importance of one's own personal conversion, one's decision to give one's life entirely. We are so turned off by those we sometimes refer to as evangelicals that we dismiss the importance of making a life long connection with the Lord of life.

Perhaps we're puzzled because we've lost track of the importance of the cross as our great iconic symbol. No few of you have pointed out to me that when our sanctuary was remodeled in years past, the cross that always was on the altar disappeared and has not returned. Are we ashamed of the cross?

It is in the middle of the night, in the midst of this conversation with Nicodemus, in the midst of our own “lostness” that Jesus utters what may be the most well-known verses in the scriptures: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Only by truly hearing these great words do we sense the eschatological nature of the cross. For through the cross of Jesus Christ which was lifted up for all to see, we are invited into God's future, the eschaton, which

“envisions a new mode of life for which there are no precedents”⁴ to use Gail O’Day’s words.

What is always interesting in the history of Christian faith is be aware that some communities have figured out the nuances of this nighttime encounter sooner than others. In this Black History Month, it is worth noting that one of the communities in American history that grasped the seriousness of this text’s invitation was that of the African American slaves beginning as far back as the 1600’s. “Nicodemus’s nighttime visit to Jesus offered an important biblical precedent for their own worship gatherings. Slaves were allowed to participate in formal Christian worship only at their masters’ discretion; they were not allowed to have their own worship and rarely were allowed access to the Bible. Therefore, they had clandestine religious gatherings at night, a practice that continued after emancipation. The slaves saw in Nicodemus’s night visit proof that it was possible to come to Jesus even when those in power forbade it. Nicodemus was a model, someone who was willing to act on his own against the will of authorities. The slaves’ faith surpassed that of Nicodemus. Nicodemus’s night visit was only exploratory, and in this story in John 3, he does not understand the invitation Jesus extends to him. The slaves, by contrast, understood and embraced what Jesus had to offer. They were willing to risk their safety and their very lives to come to Jesus.”⁵

How many other communities are there who still do not have full permission and freedom to seek Jesus Christ in the light of day? We know that there are still repressive regimes around the world where worshiping a Christian God in public is anathema. We know that the church itself often closes its doors to those who would seek acceptance – whether people of color, or those from a wider spectrum of sexual orientations than ours, or those from a different socio-economic background than those who control the keys to the church or the access to the altar.

Each time I hear the story of Nicodemus, I find myself wondering what happens to him. How does his exploratory journey end? Does he remain uncommitted, stuck in the middle of his nighttime of indecision? I actually find myself hoping that he moves from mere curiosity about Jesus grows into a full embrace of Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 555.

When John Ames grows to adulthood, he becomes a pastor of a protestant church in the town of Gilead where he grew up. In a letter that he writes near the end of his life to his young son, he recalls how he often walked through the streets of the town in the middle of the night.

“People are always up in the night, with their colicky babies and their sick children, or fighting or worrying or full of guilt. And, of course, the milkmen and all the people on early shifts and late shifts. Sometimes when I walked past the house of one of my own families and saw the lights on, I’d think maybe I should stop and see if there was a problem I could help with, but then I’d decide it was an intrusion and I’d go on. Past the Boughton’s house, too. It was years before I really knew what was troubling them, close as we had always been. It was on the nights I didn’t sleep at all and I didn’t feel like reading that I’d walk through town at one or two o’clock. In the old days I could walk down every single street, past every house, in about an hour. I’d try to remember the people who lived in each one, and whatever I knew about them, which was often quite a lot, since many of the ones who weren’t mine were Boughton’s. And I’d pray for them. And I’d imagine peace they didn’t expect and couldn’t account for descending on their illness or their quarreling or their dreams.”⁶

When I first read those words, I found myself weeping because a pastor knows so many things about the struggles of those who have been placed in his or her care. A pastor knows that all of us are in need of a peace we do not expect and cannot account for descending on our joys and sorrows, on our quarreling, and on our dreams.

John Ames writes, “Then I’d go into the church and pray some more and wait for daylight. I’ve often been sorry to see a night end, even while I have loved seeing the dawn come.”⁷

Night can be a symbol of perpetual darkness, of course, and it’s always possible that we might remain lost in the dark. But nighttime can also point to a time of seeking and discernment when we finally break through the pain of existence and realize that know that we are not alone. John Ames says,

⁶ Robinson, 71.

⁷ Ibid.

“Augustine says the Lord loves each of us as an only child, and that has to be true: ‘He will wipe the tears from all faces.’”⁸

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁸ Ibid., 245.