

“Mysterious Encounter”

John 3:1-17

June 7, 2009

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The story of Nicodemus is a familiar one. He comes to Jesus at night because he doesn't want to be seen in the light of day. He learns from Jesus that he must be born of water and spirit — born again. Today many people emphasize being born of water in regard to baptism; I, myself, find the metaphor of human birth from the waters of the womb a helpful image. But Nicodemus rightly points out the difficulty of “entering again into the womb.” Even if one could, who would want to ever leave this nurturing and protective environment? Being born can be quite traumatic. Jesus points Nicodemus to a second birth, a birth of the spirit. To be born again “in spirit” can be traumatic as well. We have such a propensity to repeat the past, to maintain the status quo. Sometimes, even if the status quo is not so good, the unknown is too fearful to take a chance on. The call to be “born again” may apply to us individually as we need to be completely transformed to healthy relationships, away from bad habits, to a new orientation of life--all those ways we as individuals need to relinquish the womb of our old lives and be born to new life. Being born again requires change and change often demands more than we think we are capable of; we fear change; we fear being born again to an uncertain future even if that future may be one of possibilities.

Churches, also, may be “born again.” In fact, churches often need to be born again. In our own church history, four major denominations gave up their individual denominational life in order to give birth to the United Church of Christ. Our UCC constitution states that “if need be, we die” in order to give life to God's work in the world. Jesus modeled for the church the willingness to die for authentic faithfulness; yet new life is born from old.

In human communities, institutions, and governments there is often a need to be born again. Jesus' message says this is true in all areas of life. We may not think about being born again when it comes to political worlds, and yet, Jesus in his time called for this kind of relinquishment from the powers that be in order that the power of God might be revealed. June 4-10 is designated by the World Council of Churches (of which we UCC churches are members) as the “World Week for Peace in Palestine Israel.” I would suggest that one reason that Palestine Israel has not found peace is because its people are afraid to be “born again.” They fear giving up the boundaries of a womb that provides one kind of life for the birthing of the possibility of fullness of life. The World Council of Churches offers a worship liturgy for this week devoted to peace in the Middle East, including some powerful stories from Palestine Israel. I would like to share three of them with you.

STORY ONE: BY OMAR HARAMY, A PALESTINIAN CHRISTIAN FROM JERUSALEM.

*He prays... “Loving Father, Creator of all of us ...WHERE ARE YOU? I have no security. I have lost my dignity. I do not want to wake up in the morning or leave the house. I am tired from checkpoints. I am tired from the harassment of soldiers everyday. I am very, very tired. The West Bank is only one tenth the size of Ireland and there are hundreds and hundreds of check points and blocked roads: physical obstacles, dirt piles, concrete blocks, boulders, trenches, fences, and iron gates — all restricting the movement of Palestinians. I have been crossing or trying to cross these checkpoints for over nine years on a daily basis. Not a day that passes by I do not witness a story that has contributed to my despair.*

*I find it so hard to take it looking at the eyes of the sick as they are turned back from checkpoints; I can't take it watching school children turned back and not allowed to go to school; I am weak and I need you to help. Jesus tells me to love my enemy. I try, but it's very,*

*very hard. Loving Father, Creator, please send the peace I need, that we all need, and help us to love again”.*

**STORY TWO: AN ENCOUNTER WITH AN ANONYMOUS SOLDIER IN THE WEST BANK, TOLD BY A PEACE WORKER.** *At Huwara checkpoint near Nablus, a young Israeli soldier came over to speak to me across barbed wire. He asked me where I was from and why I was there. I told him we were volunteers working in a very small way to end the occupation and working for a just peace in Israel/Palestine. Well this soldier just stood quietly listening. Suddenly, his eyes filled with tears. Pointing at his gun, he said: ‘I don’t want this. I don’t want to do this. We stood together, not speaking, but in a shared silence which was very moving. Eventually I said: ‘You are a good man. May I tell people what you have said?’ With his eyes still full of tears he nodded, and walked away.*

**STORY THREE: BY OMER GOLDMAN, A 19-YEAR-OLD FROM TEL AVIV AND MEMBER OF THE SHMINISTIM, ISRAELI HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IMPRISONED FOR REFUSING TO SERVE IN AN ARMY THAT OCCUPIES PALESTINIAN TERRITORY.**

*“I first went to prison on September 23rd, 2008, and served 35 days. I am lucky: after two times in jail, I got a medical discharge, but I’m the only one. Many of my friends will be in prison too: in for three weeks, out for one, and then back in, over and over, until they are 21.*

*The reason? We refuse to do military service for the Israeli army because of the occupation. I grew up with the army. My father was deputy head of Mossad (the Israeli Intelligence Agency) and I saw my sister, who is eight years older than me, do her military service. As a young girl, I wanted to be a soldier. The military was such a part of my life that I never even questioned it. But earlier this year, I went to a peace demonstration in Palestine. I had always been told that the Israeli army was there to defend me, but during that demonstration Israeli soldiers opened fire on me and my friends with rubber bullets and tear-gas grenades. I was shocked and scared. I saw the truth. I saw the reality. I saw for the first time that the most dangerous thing in Palestine is the Israeli soldiers: the very people who are supposed to be on my side.*

*When I came back to Israel, I knew I had changed. And so, I have joined with a number of other young people who are refusing to serve - they call us the Shministim. Many have asked me about what it was like for me during this time. Of course I got scared while in prison. But also, it’s frightening that my country is the way that it is, locking up young people who are against violence and war. And I worry that what I am doing may damage my future. It’s hard to go from being a free girl who can decide things for herself — what to wear, who to see, what to eat — and then go back to having every minute of the day time-tabled. Last time I was out of prison, I went to see my dad. We tried not to talk politics. He cares about me as his daughter, that I am suffering, but he doesn’t want to hear my views. He never came to visit me in prison. I think it was too hard for him to see me in there. He is an army man. I suppose, actually, we have similar characters. We both fight for what we believe in.”*

I think that Jesus would say to the people of Palestine Israel that you must be born again. You must be brave and not fear relinquishing a false security in order to live the fullness of life God wants for all creation. I would suggest that being “born again” is much harder than simply reciting a few short confessional words; being “born again” is even harder than participating in a sacrament that involves water. Being “born again” means giving it all up for God’s call on our lives and that call is to us as individuals, to us as churches, and to us as institutions and governments. Being born again asks us to be brave; it means facing an unknown future knowing that God loves us and cares for us and that though being born again may require trauma in the end is something miraculous — the beauty of life filled with new possibilities.