NICODEMUS

IT WAS A SNAKE THAT STARTED IT ALL -- THE SERPENT WHO COST US ALL OUR PLACE IN PARADISE & DROVE US OUT INTO THE WILDERNESS. ANOTHE SNAKE WAS USED TO HELP ME UNDERSTAND THIS: "AS MOSES LIFTED UP THE SERPENT IN THE WILDERNESS," THE TEACHER ONCE TOLD ME, "SO MUST THE SON OF MAN BE LIFTED UP."...STANDING AT THE FOOT OF THE CROSS, I SEE NOW WHAT THAT MEANS.

PERHAPS I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN BEFORE. I AM REGARDED, AFTER ALL, AS "A TEACHER IN ISRAEL." YOU DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT ME, BUT THE PEOPLE OF JERUSALEM DID. I WAS BORN INTO ONE OF THE MOST PROMINENT & WEALTHIEST FAMILIES IN THE HOLY CITY. MY FATHER WAS A STRONG & INFLUENTIAL MAN -- THAT'S HOW WE GOT WHERE WE DID. AND I -- HIS FAVORED SON NICODEMUS -- WELL, I WAS NOT WHAT MY FATHER WANTED ME TO BE. HE TRIED TO MAKE ME STRONG. IF I WERE TO BECOME INFLUENTIAL, I WOULD NEED STATUS IN THE RELIGIOUS LIFE OF MY PEOPLE. "YOU MUST BECOME A PHARISEE," MY FATHER SAID, I DID! AND WITH HIS MONEY BEHIND ME: "WE MUST GET YOU ELECTED TO THE SANHEDRIN." I WAS.

IN ALL TRUTHFULNESS, I WAS NOTHING LIKE MY FATHER -- STRONG-WILLE POWERFUL, OUTSPOKEN. NO - THE TRUTH IS THAT I AVOIDED IN ANY WAY POSSIBLE ANY KIND OF CONFLICT OR CONFRONTATION. I FOUND MY SECURITY IN JUST GOING ALONG WITH THE CROWD. AND AS I NOW STAND HERE IN THIS CROWD AT THE FOOT OF THE CROSS, I KNOW WHO I AM AND WHAT I AM -- C O W A R D! I HAD THE POWER & THE INFLUENCE -- I HAD THE VOICE -- THE OPPORTUNITY TO SPEAK. I COULD HAVE STOPPE THIS CRUCIFIXION -- AT LEAST I COULD HAVE TRIED.---- BUT THEY WERE LIKE SNAKES IN THE GRASS!

IT WAS 3 O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING WHEN THEY CALLED - THE DEAD OF NIGHT. WORD CAME TO ME BY MESSENGER: "A SPECIAL MEETING OF THE COUNCIL, THE SANHEDRIN!" HE CRIED, AND OFF HE RAN. THAT WAS ILLEGAL - AND THEY KNEW IT. WE WERE NOT ALLOWED TO MEET AT SUCH AN HOUR.....WHAT COULD BE SO IMPORTANT TO DEMAND A BREACH OF RULES LIKE THIS??? I WOULD OBJECT, I TOLD MYSELF AS I RUSHED IN

AND THEN I SAW---JESUS. BUT WHY WAS HE HERE - HANDS BOUND? WHERE WERE HIS FOLLOWERS? I RECOGNIZED HIM, OF COURSE - "THE TEACHER." I HAD SEEN HIM BEFORE...ONCE -- IT WAS AN UNCHARACTERISTIC MOMENT FOR ME -- ONCE WHEN THE SOLDIERS HAD BEEN SENT TO BRING JESUS TO THE COUNCIL --- & THEY CAME BACK EMPTY-HANDED --- I DID, IN A WAY, STAND UP FOR HIM. "DOES OUR LAW JUDGE A MAN BEFORE IT HEARS HIM?" I ASKED. THEY TURNED TO ME AND SNARLED, "ARE YOU A GALILEAN TOO?" THAT WAS ENOUGH; IT STOPPED ME COLD. I WAS AFRAID TO SAY ANYTHING MORE. SO NOW - BEFORE THIS ILLEGAL SESSION, THERE WAS NO WAY I WAS GOING TO SPEAK -- NO WAY! THEY ALREADY KNEW WHAT THEY WANTED -- D E A T H -- & THEY WOULD GET IT -- THEIR WAY.

I WATCHED & ~~LISTED~~ AS CAIAPHAS - ACTING LESS LIKE GOD'S HIGH PRIEST & MORE LIKE A CRAZED MANIAC - KEPT CHARGING - KEPT PROBING - KEPT ASKING - KEPT ACCUSING --- SEARING FOR SOME OPENING, SOMEONE TO TESTIFY. BUT ALL TO NO AVAIL --- UNTIL IN DESPERATION, CAIAPHAS FACED JESUS HEAD ON & CRIED OUT: "ENOUGH OF THIS! THERE IS REALLY ONLY ONE ISSUE AT STAKE & IT IS THIS: ANSWER ME UNDER OATH TO THE SUPREME GOD OF ISRAEL: A R E Y O U T H E S O N O F G O D, A S Y O U H A V E C L A I M E D?" THE SILENCE WAS HEAVY, AS IF IT WERE WAITING TO CRACK UNDER ITS OWN WEIGHT --- FOR IF HE ANSWERED, "YES" HE WOULD DIE AS A BLASPHEMER. THEY WAITED, & INTO THAT SILENCE HE ANSWERED, "I AM."

CAIAPHAS - LIKE A MAN OUT OF HIS MIND - TORE AT HIS ROBE - RIPPING IT AT ITS HEM - THE ~~SIGN OF UNBEARABLE GRIEF & HORR~~OR - CRYING OUT AT THE SAME TIME. "BLASPHEMY! BLASPHEMY! YOU HEARD HIM! WHAT MORE WITNESS DO WE NEED? HE IS GUILTY OF DEATH! DEATH!"..... I HEARD IT - & I DIDN'T SAY A WORD. I WAS FROZEN WITH FEAR AT WHAT WAS HAPPENING -- FROZEN WITH A....COWARD'S FEAR.

BUT NO MORE--TODAY I WILL BECOME A POOR MAN AMONG MY PEOPLE. TODAY I WILL BECOME AN OUTCAST -- ONCE THEY HEAR THAT I HAVE ACCEPTED HIM -- ONCE THEY KNOW THAT I BELIEVE IN HIM --- SON OF GOD,MY SAVIOR --- THEY WILL CAST ME OUT & SEEK TO DESTROY ME TOO....BUT HERE AT THE FOOT OF THE CROSS, THE PICTURE BECAME CLEARER -- HIS WORDS CAME RUSHING BACK AT ME -- THAT NIGHT UNDER THE DARKNESS ON THE ROOFTOP -- HE SOUNDED LIKE ONE FROM GOD -- WHAT DID HE MEAN WHEN HE SPOKE TO ME ---"BORN AGAIN - WATER & THE SPIRIT?" AND THAT GLORIOUS PROMISE: "FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY SON, THAT WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM SHOULD NOT PERISH, BUT HAVE ETERNAL LIFE. FOR GOD DID NOT SEND HIS SON INTO THE WORLD TO CONDEMN THE WORLD, BUT THAT THE WORLD MIGHT BE SAVED THROUGH HI

I ONCE WAS BLIND - BUT NOW I SEE! WHAT I SEE IS HOW FOOLISH I WAS TO CRINGE OVER MY COWARDICE & NOT TRYING TO STOP THE CRUCIFIXION! HE DID NOT WANT ME TO SAVE HIM -- HE CAME TO SAVE ME -- & ALL WHO WOULD BELIEVE IN HIM!".....I AM STILL ASHAMED OF MY COWARDICE -- BUT I TELL YOU I NO LONGER SLITHER LIKE A SERPENT. WITH MY FRIEND JOSEPH, I WILL CLAIM HIS BODY. WE WILL CARRY HIM TO REST IN THE GRAVE. T H I S I S M Y S A V I O R -- & THOUGH WE ALL LAY WITH HIM IN THE TOMB, HIS WORDS STILL RING OUT WITH HOPE: "I AM THE RESURRECTION & THE LIFE -- I GO TO PREPARE A PLACE FORE YOU!"

THE TIME FOR SILENCE & FEAR & COWARDICE IS OVER! NOW IS THE TIME TO PROCLAIM IT LOUDLY! "WHAT YOU HAVE SEEN IN SECRET PROCLAIM OPENLY!" HE SAID. "YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN," HE SAID, "OF WATER & THE SPIRIT." I AM. THAT IS WHY I AM NOW BOLD TO SPEAK.....THE SERPENT WILL NOT HAVE THE FINAL WORD!