

Jesus the light of the world John 3:17-21

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Are you afraid of the Dark? As a child I was very afraid. Now I realize that it was due to horror films I had watched, especially one titled **The Cyclops**, about a gigantic one-eyed man who could empty entire cattle cars of beef into his hungry mouth. This fearfulness dramatically impacted my daily chore of taking the garbage out to a can sitting in front of the house, which if I forgot to do in daylight would have to be done after dark. So, garbage bag in hand, I would very quietly open the back door, stealthily sneak down the back steps, click open the yard gate and gently lift the can lid before ... throwing the garbage in, slapping the lid down, slamming the gate shut behind me and dashing back up the stairs into the house all while imagining Mr. Cyclops rising from out of the backyard trees to snatch me up for an evening snack.

These days I actually like being out after dark, first because I now refuse to watch horror films, but more importantly because I have the light of Jesus shining in my heart. With Jesus, the light of the world, living in me I never have to fear the darkness ever again. While this may sound sappily religious, it is basically what today's message is all about: Jesus as the LIGHT OF THE WORLD.

The Apostle John opened his gospel account by first describing Jesus as "THE WORD," Who before the beginning of the world was both God and with God and through whom all things were made.

His next description was of Jesus the "**LIGHT OF THE WORLD**," shining in the darkness and bringing life to all, with the darkness never being able to overcome it. John loved this image of Jesus as THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD, using it often both in both his Gospel account and his first letter to the Churches.

In fact, have you ever realized that the most popular verse in our Bible – John 3:16, about Jesus being sent to save our world – was framed within a discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus about living in darkness or coming to the light.

Chapter three of John's Gospel has Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a noted teacher of the law coming to visit Jesus "**by night**." Now he may have done so because nighttime was a convenient opportunity to gain a personal audience with Jesus, or because he wanted to hide this visit from other Pharisees who were seeking to discredit Jesus. But, from the conversation that follows, we must also see his nighttime visit as symbolic of a man, who while thinking otherwise about himself, had long lived in spiritual darkness, but was now beginning to come into Jesus' light.

So, Nicodemus was coming to Jesus intellectually as well as physically "in the dark." There were important concepts in Jesus' teachings that Nicodemus did not understand.

Jesus had told him that, "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again, born from above," and Nicodemus couldn't wrap his mind around that. Isn't this a bit ironic, because Nicodemus was a prominent teacher of the Hebrew Bible and aren't such teachers in the business of dispelling darkness with the light of God's word? Supposing that Nicodemus knew the scriptures almost as well as himself, even Jesus was surprised at his lack of understanding that everyone – you and me included – needs a second, spiritual, birth into God's family: "Are you the teacher of Israel," he asked, "and yet you do not understand these things?"

Of course, it isn't the **darkness of ignorance** that the Apostle John wants to talk with us about, rather, it is the **darkness of sin**. In today's scripture lesson, John writes, "This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil."

All who do evil hate the light
and do not come to the light
so that their deeds may not be exposed"

John 3:20

Evil is the real problem. Under cover of darkness, spiritual darkness, evil enlists the human heart in its battle against the light. You see the darkness – the evil – in

our world does not simply ignore the light, it has long and – thankfully – unsuccessfully waged war against light that has been given to us in Jesus. That is what John meant about *THE LIGHT shining in the darkness and the darkness not overcoming it.*

And we all nod our heads in agreement. Looking around at our society, we observe darkness at work everywhere. "It's a shame," we say, "what other people do." "Ain't it awful" we concur. But we need to be careful here. It's all too easy to see the darkness out there in other people and not see the darkness here in ourselves.

When we think about sin as darkness, we want to think of really dark sins -- the kind of which other people are guilty: criminal acts, embezzlement, murder, that sort of thing.

But notice, when John describes brazen sin, perpetrated by obvious sinners – as he next does in chapter 4 – he doesn't use the imagery of darkness. When John wants to show us bold-faced sinners, such as the Samaritan woman who met Jesus at the well, he uses a different image. Here was a woman who has already gone through five husbands, and, as Jesus points out, "The one you have now is not your husband" (4:18).

But in describing her condition, neither John nor Jesus uses the word darkness; instead her condition is one of **thirst**. As He points to the well where she has come to draw water, Jesus tells her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I give them will never be thirsty" (4:13-14). When it

comes to the hard sins, the really notorious sins, Jesus, in the words of an old hymn, "**looks past the sin and sees the need.**"

But back here in chapter 3, notice that when John is using the image of darkness to reveal sin's deceptive grip on the human heart.... it is in Jesus' conversation with an upstanding community leader, a very religious person, a teacher of the law no less! May I suggest here, where John is describing the darkness of sin, that you and I are expected to see ourselves implicated. It's not just the hopeless sinner who is in view here; it is the respectable sinner as well.

So John is describing what the darkness does to us! It robs us of faith. It delivers us into the worst sin of all, which is **the sin of unbelief**. John writes ...

but those who do not believe are condemned already, **because they have not believed** in the name of the only Son of God
John 3:18

He then goes on to say, "*Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they*

have not believed in the name of the only Son of God **It is not gross sin, you see, that disqualifies us from a life with God; it is not believing.**

Now, it's not that such people do not believe in anything. They do; they believe in something. We all do. What we believe in is whatever serves as the core truth around which we center our lives. There's something or Someone -- however undefined -- around which everyone of us builds our life and from which we take our cues for action. This is the basic definition of **faith**.

Several years ago, author Richard Foster described what he thought were the three most likely forces at work in the lives of modern Americans. His list was: **Money, sex, and power**. These three may very well be the essential building blocks of our own, all too common, American civil religion and we have a lot of latitude in how we use them.

Take money, for example, it can be the most important thing in my life whether or not I have much of it or even want much of it. The same with sex and power; I can err on either side of an obsession. In the name of power, I can seek to control everybody else, or I can see to it that everybody else controls me. And the way I chose to play it exposes my most basic beliefs about what is true in life. If I insist on being the master, it shows that I believe that power is the safe way to navigate through life. If I choose to be the slave, it shows that I believe subservience is the best path to security.

Whatever I make into the central value of my life becomes the core of my faith. The only trouble is, outside of God my faith is misplaced. And the outcome my misplaced faith is at best restrictive or at its worst destructive: a restrictive faith, because it may

prevent me from living in the freedom for which I was created, or destructive because it places not only my life, but also the lives of others at risk.

Do you see how darkness has deceived us? And yet we love it! John writes, "*People loved darkness rather than light,*" We are prone to take refuge in the darkness! Why? Because we fear that the light will expose us, and once exposed, we will be condemned.

For all who do evil hate the light
and do not come to the light,
so that their deeds may not be exposed.

John 3:20

But this is an unfounded fear. ***Christ was not sent into this world "to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."*** Jesus does not judge us; what judges us is our

own misplaced faith. In the language of John, we "***are condemned already, because....***" Why? ***because we have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.*** He alone is able to secure us in this life and in the life to come.

It is said that Thomas Moore looked out his window one day to see a convicted felon on his way to the gallows and remarked, *there but by the grace of God go I.* His listeners thought he was making some pious statement about how his religion had made of him such a good man But in reality what he was saying is that we are all sinfully guilty and headed to the gallows were it not for the intervention of God's grace in our lives. *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. (3:17)*

So what Jesus and John hoped for Nicodemus and for me as well, is that if – in the Light of Jesus – I can see that the best of my goodness is no different from that of a condemned criminal. But, I can also see how God's grace can transform even me, so I can release my hold on the darkness and embrace Him in whom the light of life shines.

For Nicodemus and for us, it is just like that time in the wilderness when the people of God were being assaulted by poisonous snakes. They cried out in their anguish, "*What shall we do?*" God told Moses to make a bronze image of a snake and mount it on a pole in the midst of the camp. Then, whoever was bitten had but to look in faith upon that image to find relief.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that "*just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes may in him have eternal life.*"

This Son of Man is none other than Jesus, and in time Jesus was "lifted up," literally, on a cross. That's what Scripture means when it says in the most famous Bible verse of all that God "**gave us his only Son.**" He gave him up. He sacrificed Him out of love for you and me. And we have but to look to Him in faith – to change our mind about the core value in our lives, relying no longer on how much or how little money or power we

have or anything else but instead, relying only on Him, on Jesus Christ, as the only One who can secure us, not just in this life but for eternity. As the Apostle John wrote in his opening lines: *in Him was life, and the life was the light of all people.* (John 1:4)

Making decisions in the dark can lead to some regrettable consequences. Back in the days before electricity, a tightfisted old farmer was taking his hired man to task for carrying a lighted lantern when he went to call on his best girl. "Why," the farmer exclaimed, "when I went a-courtin' I never carried one of them things. I always went in the dark." "Yes," the hired man said, "and look what you got!"

I love the way light works. The tiniest candle can illumine the darkest cavern. One thing I know for sure: I need the light of Jesus in the dark cavern of my heart. While we don't know how their evening conversation ended, there is evidence that Nicodemus came to feel this way as well. How about you?