

WORSHIP

Sermon | 3.11.2018



The Promise of Eternal Life

By the Reverend Pen Peery

John 3:1-19

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.' Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.'

Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." 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 said to him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

'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. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.



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Our second Scripture this morning is from the gospel of John. It contains the verse that is probably the most recognizable part of the Bible – one that shows up on billboards and tractor trailers and in the outfield at baseball games. John 3:16 is also a verse that Martin Luther called “the gospel in miniature.” Today we will hear that verse in the context of the larger story – about a Pharisee named Nicodemus. Listen with me for the word of God.

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Can you remember a time when you experienced real darkness? I’m not talking about the last basketball loss; I mean real, physical darkness – the kind of darkness that makes it impossible to see anything. I’ve had a few experiences of such darkness: A Boy Scout trip I took when we camped overnight in a cavern in Tennessee – that was really dark...and really the last time I will ever sleep in a cave. A night I spent in a remote village in Malawi, Africa – when the clouds rolled in and settled, leaving us straining our eyes in the darkness after the last campfire went out. A couple of nights Lindsey and I spent in our married student housing apartment while she was in graduate school after a hurricane blew through Richmond and knocked out the electricity.

Those of us who live regularly with light at the flip of a switch generally have few regular experiences of real darkness. We have night-lights in the hallway, LED lights on our alarm clocks, flashlight apps on our cell phones, and streetlights streaming through the blinds on our houses. But I imagine that most of us have known times when the light was absent...and it was dark...really dark.

I found myself thinking about these things this week because light and darkness are a theme in John’s gospel. And it’s a theme we have to be careful about – because sometimes that theme carries racial overtones and has been used to perpetuate racist stereotypes.

But aware of that temptation, it’s hard to miss the frequency of the gospel-writer’s theme. John’s gospel is full of the contrast between darkness and light.

This morning, the passage we read from John’s gospel begins with us meeting a man named Nicodemus – who, we discover, decides to seek out Jesus under the cover and in the safety of night – and the passage ends with John’s convicting reminder about the human preference for darkness over light.

That reminder has always been difficult for me to hear, but most of my life experience suggests that John was right.

This is the judgment – that the light has come into the world, and the people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.



Light and truth expose the ugliness, the true measure, the full freight of our brokenness. And so we prefer the darkness, where we hide, or at least where we prefer to examine our lives through the subdued illumination of, say, candlelight. Candlelight, after all, offers a more romantic, if limited view of ourselves.

Full light can be harsh.

It is less generous.

More probing.

Sometimes it can even be more than we can take.

A friend of mine told me a story about an Episcopal priest named Austin Ford who worked with the urban poor and homeless population of Atlanta. Part of his ministry involved work with children who lived in the projects – children whose worldview was often limited to low slung brick apartments, grass-less yards, failing public schools, and crumbling public infrastructure. Knowing this, Ford decided to try an experiment to broaden that limited view of the world for those children; he rented a bus and took a group of children on a one-day cultural expansion tour.

They visited the High Museum of Art, they had a picnic at Piedmont Park, they went to the Atlanta Zoo, they toured the gothic majesty of the Cathedral of St. Philip. They hit the high spots of the city in what seemed to be a wonderful, enchanting day for the children.

But that evening one of the boys who had accompanied Ford on the tour set a fire that destroyed the project apartments of his family and their next door neighbors. According to the newspaper, when he was asked why he had destroyed his own home, the young boy replied, “Until today I didn’t know just how ugly all this was.”

Sometimes it does seem easier not to know the truth, to stay in the dark and away from the exposure of the light. For that child, what was exposed was blight...but more than that, it was the harsh reality of a city that allowed children to live in different worlds – sometimes defined by poverty, other times defined by privilege – both of which might go unnoticed until they are exposed to the light.

The same is true of us and our lives.

Light and truth expose the flaws in our carefully-crafted self-portraits, the shadow-sides of the respectable selves we would present to family and friends and co-workers. Light and truth uncover the inconsistencies in our often-rehearsed autobiographies.

Earlier this week I went on a run with a friend.

Running for me is spiritual exercise as much as a physical one.



On the run, as it often does, the conversation moved from the superficial to the real – from “hi, how are you?” to “what is going on in your life?” My friend asked, “what do you worry about when you wake up in the middle of the night?”

The preacher in me started thinking about Nicodemus – a well-respected religious leader who was supposed to have his life and his faith together, but who found himself coming to Jesus under the cover of night to ask the real questions of his heart because, really, he was unsettled and was just too ashamed to admit it in the bright of day.

In truth, many of us are not as much together or at peace as we may project. Many of us lie awake at night beset by anxieties about what?

About keeping the façade behind which we have had to live for so long?

About the fragile peace that has us walking on eggshells around our families? Anxieties about children – and how well we have prepared them for a future we cannot – ultimately – control?

Anxieties about a career that is no longer satisfying, and yet holds us captive because we are of a certain age and starting over seems out of the question? Anxieties about an illness or a limitation and the way those things betray our lack of faith and hope about the future?

Anxieties about our silence or complicity in the face of some injustice?

Anxieties about being found out?

About us not really being enough?

These are things most of us would prefer to work out in the darkness of our own private thoughts, not the sort of things we would expose to the scrutiny of the light. But we know the truth.

And the truth is that we are captive...that we are stuck...cornered by a mixture of things we have done, and things we have not done. By promises we have failed to trust. By a pride that we cannot seem to shake.

We have a name for it.

The thing that keeps us from peace within ourselves, that we hide in the darkest corners of our souls – it is sin.

And sin isn't just about mistakes or the bad choices we make.

Sin is bigger. Sin is separation. It is personal and it is systemic.

And the way out of that darkness is not just a nifty program, or a new routine, or even doing the best we can to channel our own will and self-discipline.



The only way out, friends, the only lasting way out, is by grace.

Grace that forgives us in spite of whatever weight we might carry.

Grace that empowers us with more than our best intentions.

Grace that invites us into communities of support, compassion, and care.

That is the context for that most famous of Bible verses: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that those who believe in him may not perish but have eternal life.* And the verse after it, too: *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.*

Do you see? Because a lot of people don't...

God's judgment is not condemnation!

It is light.

A light that exposes truth – and reveals the world for what is – and what it can be.

The Light of God comes to us as a gift of immeasurable grace. By that grace we are enabled not only to come out of our own shadows, but also become bearers of light in the darkness around us.

Another friend tells a story about the author and minister Robert Fulgham. Evidently, Fulgham has a practice of having a really annoying question ready whenever a speaker finishes a talk and invites questions from the audience. Fulgham says he always waits a minute and then asks, "What is the meaning of life?"

"You never know," he writes, "somebody may have the answer."

Fulgham goes on to say that in Europe he once heard a lecture by a philosopher named Alexander Papaderos. At the end of the talk, Papaderos asked if there were any questions. Fulgham look around the room, then raised his hand, and asked, "What is the meaning of life?" You can imagine that the learned audience groaned, but Papaderos didn't miss a beat.

Taking out his wallet, he brought out a round mirror about the size of a quarter.

He said, "When I was a child we were very poor. One day on the road I found the broken piece of a mirror. I tried to find all the pieces and put them together, but it was impossible, so I kept the largest piece. I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated that I could reflect light into dark places. It became a game for me to get into the most inaccessible places I could find.

As I went about my growing up, I would take it out in idle moments and continue the challenge of the game. As I became a man, I grew to understand that this was not just a



child's game, but a metaphor for what I might do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of the light. But light – truth, understanding, knowledge – will only shine in the dark places if I reflect it. I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have I can reflect light into the dark places of this world and perhaps others may see and do likewise. This is what I am about. This is the meaning of life.”

Then, Fulgham said, he took his small mirror and, holding it carefully, caught the bright rays of the sunlight streaming through the window and reflected them onto my face.

The light we so often fear is the same light that can make us whole, that can give us peace, that can lead us home. It is eternal – and you and I are bearers of that light into the dark corners of this world – because we belong to one whom God sent into this world to save.

In him, John writes, was life, and the life was the light of all people.

The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1:4)

