

In the Dark?
John 3:1-21
March 12, 2017 – Second Sunday of Lent

Through the month of February we have concentrated on the Sermon on the Mount as the guide for Christian living. Then, last week, we entered the season of Lent. Lent is about our relationship with God and our experience of Grace, the amazing love that God has for each of us. But today, I'd like to again think of that love, that relationship in terms of the light/darkness paradigm.

If you were here Ash Wednesday, you heard the scripture from Matthew – Do not store up treasures on earth but treasures in heaven, for where you treasure is there your heart will be also. (Matt 6:19-21) On that evening, I told the congregation that I feel a special attachment to these verses. I also confessed that I have never really made the connection between these verses and the verses that follow; for after these verses, Jesus tells us, if we are healthy, our bodies will be filled with light. If we are unhealthy, our bodies will be filled with darkness. Indeed treasures in heaven equate to walking in the light of God's love.

And now, today, in John's Gospel, we read the story of Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a Jewish leader, coming to Jesus at night, coming to Jesus out of the darkness to inquire as to his relationship with God. And Jesus tells him, you must be born again. . . born of water and spirit in order to enter the kingdom of God. Now you and I are both aware that this verse has been interpreted, and reinterpreted, and misinterpreted in a variety of ways by various Christian groups. "Born again" Christians claim this verse relates to a spiritual acceptance of Christ as Lord and Savior, without which one cannot enter heaven. Christians that are extremely sacramental see the verse a related to Christian Baptism, and claim that "water and Spirit" are obviously a reference to the sacrament. Some of them will even claim that the unbaptized cannot enter heaven. With due respect to those traditions, I want to take a much broader interpretation of these verses.

Being born anew is a symbolic reference to a new beginning. As the Spirit of God blows where it wishes, as we hear that Spirit in our hearts, we truly experience life-changing events. Indeed we experience new beginnings, a new creation, a new birth. The love of God changes things; it's that simple. To be born again is to experience that love, that change. I remember hearing the late Bishop James Thomas speak in the late 1990's. He said, "I'm not at all surprised that these so-called 'born again Christians,' have experienced the love of Christ to the extent that they have a new birth; what I'm surprised about is that it's only happened once." You see, Bishop Thomas' point was that we experience that love, that new birth, that new beginning over and over again as we seek to move into an

ever closer relationship with Christ, as we experience that Good News of the Gospel.

So Jesus goes on to tell Nicodemus how the Son of Man must be lifted up. Here, in a style typically of John, we have a double meaning. Jesus must be lifted up in humility, lifted up on the Good Friday Cross; and, Jesus must be lifted up in glory, lifted up in the Easter Resurrection, lifted up from the grave, lifted up to the right hand of God.

Then comes the most famous verse in the entire Christian Bible. These words have been translated into more languages than any other statement, sacred or secular: John 3:16 – “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” And the Gospel continues: “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” Wonderful, wonderful words. . . But who can tell me what comes after them?

“And this is that judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.” Light. . . The light of life. . . The light of God. . .

Nicodemus came in darkness, in hiding, in fear; but Jesus taught and healed and preached in the light of day. Indeed Jesus brought the light of God into a dark and troubled world; and I believe that we, as Christians are called to lead a life in that light, to share the light, to radiate the light.

Some of you know that a group from this church will be traveling to Germany in May to follow the footsteps of Martin Luther. In preparation for that trip, I’ve been doing some reading and studying about Luther and the German Reformation. As most of you know, Luther was a Catholic Monk and a professor in the University at Wittenberg when, in 1517, he nailed his 95 theses on the church door. At that time, Luther was a very troubled man. He felt himself a sinner, and he practiced self-hatred. In true mid-evil style, he felt the way to salvation was to recognize his sinful nature to the point of self-torment. Then, a few years later that light dawned. While Luther would never use the words himself, I might even say, “He was born again.” In 1520, he discovered in a very personal way, the Good News of the Gospel. That’s what’s behind Luther’s emphasis on “the Word.” That’s what’s behind his translating the New Testament into German. From then on, for the rest of his life, Luther concentrated on bringing the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the people. When Luther speaks out against practices of the Catholic Church, it is always, always because he believes the church is acting in ways that are not in keeping with the Gospel of

Jesus Christ. (Now, I need to be quick to say that not all of Luther's followers were as peace-loving as Luther. Many took a more extreme approach to reform; but Luther's views and actions were always scripturally based.)

Now, having said all this, I'm not about to become Lutheran. I am Methodist to the deepest part of my soul, in part because I resonate with the Methodist emphasis on the Social Gospel, on feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned. But I also resonate with the Gospel of Jesus Christ as a guide for my life. I have stated before from this pulpit my concern when I hear politicians, corporate leaders, and in some cases religious leaders who claim to be Christians advocating actions that are clearly contrary to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. No, I don't go to protest marches; but I write a lot of letters; and I publically take what I believe is the stand a Christian is called to take. It was the prophet Joshua who stated: "Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD." (Jos 24:15 NRS)

Friends, it's Lent. It's time to move into the light. It's time to serve the Lord. It's time that we as individuals, we as a church, we as a community, we as a nation, we as a world be guided by the Good News of the Gospel.

God so loved the world that he gave us the light of his Son. This Lent, may that light shine in our lives; may we live in that light; may we radiate the light of God's amazing love to all people; and may we give God all the praise and all the glory.

Let us pray. . .

Most Holy Lord,
Lead us and guide us
that we may walk in your light
every moment of every day of our lives.
This we pray in your holy name.
Amen.