

March 8, 2020 Deeper Still Lent 2

There is so much interest in darkness and light, in shades of gray or splashes of sunshine. The filmmaker, the artist, and the prosecuting attorney all love to play with these themes. When is night, really night, or darkness not fully day? When is evil truly evil and not mistaken identity, or guilt by reason of insanity? Our world is filled with nuances. Sometimes light is not darkness, yet, just as importantly, sometimes darkness is surely not light.

Usually it is during the season of Epiphany that we talk about the imagery of light, but today's message from the gospel according to the community of John, offers great imagery of light. I would consider this passage to be one of the most misused, misunderstood texts in the entire Scripture. Tim Johnson sheds some light on it (no pun intended). One single verse has provided motivation for some of the most destructive and unchristian impulses of those who take the name "Christian". "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life."

But taken literally, it suggests that those who do not believe in this Son will perish. It is difficult to overestimate the harm, hurt, and abuse that has been encouraged by this literal rendering of John's Gospel. The bloody Christian Crusade against Muslims of the middle ages was based on the belief that Muslims were a threat to believing in the Son. The Holocaust toward Jews was nurtured by

the notion that Jews were a threat to believing in the Son. Christian missionary work was often conducted among native peoples with John 3:16 as its driving force. If you do not believe you will perish. Therefore, we are free to use every tool at our disposal to stamp out Indigenous beliefs, including Indigenous language and culture, which was so naturally entwined with Indigenous beliefs.

John 3:16 is hung today in big banners at football games and baseball games as a reminder that unless you believe in a God who sends his Son as a blood sacrifice for your sinfulness you will perish, and suffer eternal damnation. Taken literally, John 3:16 becomes the cornerstone for an edifice of beliefs that include rejection of those who differ in sexual orientation or gender identity, the dominance of women by men, the sense of entitlement that Western countries have over the rest of the world. A literal rendering of John 3:16 is alive and well. It remains a potent and I believe often destructive influence, from matters of individual salvation to the way we conduct foreign policy as a nation.

Jesus says, “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” This word “save” is an interesting one because the Greek is translating a Hebrew word meaning “bring into a large open space.” That is a unique concept of salvation. Jean Paul Sartre, the great French existentialist philosopher and author of a play, entitled *No Exit*, claimed that the human condition was like being trapped in a room from which there was no

escape. It can be like that for us when we prefer to hide those aspects of our lives with which we aren't ready to deal. Our text wants to assure us, however, that God so loved the world that he takes us, one by one, into a wide and emancipating space, where there are new alternatives to our dead ends in addition to a boundless future. The Christian conviction is not that life has *No Exit*, but that it has an open door. It is God's choice to bring light where there is darkness, to change the circumstances in our human condition. Therefore, I like a different translation that says: "God sent everyone a brighter light than they had before." The guiding light of God, of Jesus. To save. To reconcile.

Our text this morning offer three formative influences on our spiritual lives and our encounter with God. While these three are not exhaustive of the ways in which a person grows and deepens in their experience of God, it is difficult to imagine any substantial spiritual growth, any rebirth without them.

The first of those formative faith influences is a community of faith. Nicodemus comes to Jesus as one whose experience of God has been nurtured and supported by a community of believers. John begins his story by identifying Nicodemus as a leader of the Jews. One of the unfortunate consequences of reading John 3:16 literally has been an excessive, almost exclusive focus on individual salvation. The central question becomes am I saved? Have I experienced personal salvation? Do I know Jesus as my personal Lord and Saviour? This "go it

alone with God” approach, of course fits quite well for people benefitting from an economic system that has a similar emphasis. The role and place of the community, the common good, is always secondary, even incidental to a focus on the individual.

But for people like Nicodemus, whose faith was formed in the Hebrew Scriptures, the role of a community of believers was *primary* in his faith development. In the Hebrew Scriptures the shaping of a loving and just *community* is God’s central concern. As a child, Nicodemus was *taught* the traditions of his faith. As a youth Nicodemus was *nurtured* in the collective wisdom and experience of a community who had long sought to know God. As an adult, Nicodemus was *sustained* by a community who encounters God at the heart of creation, in Exodus movements of liberation, in prophetic calls for justice.

John in his Gospel reminds us of Nicodemus’ place in a community of faith because John, like Jesus, considers the role of a faith community central in our own faith formation. The hymns we sing together on Sunday morning, the prayers we offer, the support we give and receive, the study and reflection all illustrate the important role a community of believers plays in our spiritual formation. When we absent ourselves from a community of faith, we are cutting ourselves off from one of God’s primary tools for inviting us into a deeper and more intimate encounter with God.

Service, caring for and about others, is the second formative influence on faith and our encounter with God revealed in this passage from John. Nicodemus is quite clear the reason he comes knocking on Jesus' door at night is that through Jesus – healing of the sick, feeding the hungry, caring for those in need – they have experienced the presence of God. For Nicodemus it was the acts of caring and compassion of Jesus, which further opened his heart to God's presence. Is that not so for us today? Was that not represented in our decisions about how to disperse our Projects Fund last week? As we offer pastoral care to others – a listening ear, a cup of coffee – are we not closer to God and Jesus' dream of heaven on earth?

Among the many problems presented with a literal reading of John 3:16 is a resulting lack of concern for human suffering. If the over riding goal is to keep people from perishing in the life to come, then the problem of their perishing in THIS life due to lack of food or health care seems unimportant. Nicodemus reminds us we encounter the presence of God precisely in those places where our hearts are open and we respond to the needs around us.

The third formative influence reflected in our Gospel this morning is openness to the guiding light of God. The question faced by Nicodemus and anyone seeking to grow in faith is: are you willing to let go of your certainties about who God is? Are you willing to experience God in new ways? Are you ready, like Abraham and Sarah to step out on a new journey with God without the

comfort of knowing exactly where it will lead you? Although Nicodemus came knocking on Jesus' door, what he ultimately discovers is that Jesus is knocking on HIS door. Jesus is inviting Nicodemus; Jesus is inviting you and me to let the guiding light of God to be our guide, to be born anew. Are we as a community; are we as individuals prepared to trust God enough to live without absolute certainty about whom God is? When Jesus comes knocking on our door, it is an invitation to grow in faith through the guidance of the Spirit.

Finally, let us return to John 3:16. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." On September 11<sup>th</sup> we were reminded how sacrificial one human being can be for the sake of another. Hundreds of firefighters and police officers risked and ultimately lost their lives in hopes of saving people they never knew. Can you imagine any of those courageous individuals entering a building with the idea of determining who was worthy to be brought out and who was not? It would be ridiculous.

The Lenten season, the liturgical context for our text, reminds us of our mortality; we are flesh and blood, subject to death and decay; we are constantly perishing. We are also capable of unthinkable atrocities toward our fellow humans. God stands with us in the depths of this decays, in our perishing. An explorer investigating uncharted oceans, whose instruments could not register the impenetrable depths of the sea, simple recorded in his log, "Deeper still." When we

contemplate the depths of God's reach, we finally must confess with breathless wonder, "Deeper still."

Elie Wiesel has provided an unforgettable description of the depths of God's loving presence. As he watched a youth, hanged by the Nazi SS, struggle for breath and life, he heard a man call out: "For God's sake, where is God" and from within me, I heard a voice answer, 'Where is he? This is where – hanging there in the gallows.'

Rather than creating a belief system that saves some and rejects others, John is simply expressing the depth and height of God's eternal love, which can be encountered in the presence of Jesus. How do we grow in faith, how do we grow in our encounter with this God who so loved the world? Where is the guiding light of God?

I don't know about you but it has been my experience that my faith is strongest, I feel most close to God when I participate in community, when I care about others, and when I let go of my certainties and remain open to the guiding of God's Spirit. And Jesus says to Nicodemus: "God loved you and every person in the world so much that God sent everyone a brighter light than they had before". When we contemplate the depths of God's reach, we must finally confess with breathless wonder: "Deeper still". May it be so. Amen.