

***Lenten Sermon Series: A Time to Repent***  
***Part III: From Darkness to Light***  
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*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God. – John 3:16-21, NIV*

In his excellent book, *Diary of a Pastor's Soul*, Princeton seminary President and former church pastor, Craig Barnes, tells the story of one baptism in particular that he remembers from his many years of pastoring a church. She was three years old and had just been adopted from India by the mission pastor and his wife in the church Barnes was serving. She had a number of health issues that would require complicated surgeries and skin grafts over the years.

Barnes said that he got through most of the baptismal liturgy, but when he saw her in the arms of her father, with her arms around his neck, and he came to the words about being adopted into the family of God, well the words just stopped -- and everyone worshiped God with tears and silent prayers of gratitude. Later, he thought about why this particular baptism touched him so. He said it had to do with the idea that baptism is about being adopted into the family of God. Barnes put it this way:

Dhini didn't ask to be adopted. She didn't earn or deserve it. She probably didn't know enough even to want it. It just came as a grace that changed everything about her life. That's the way grace works -- it is free, and merited, and unexpected, but then it expects a lot from us. We don't make changes in our life to get adopted; we make them because we have been adopted.” (*Diary of a Pastor's Soul*, M. Craig Barnes, 2020:170)

About the meaning of her baptism, he adds, “In the sacrament we receive the grace of God, and then we spend the rest of our lives learning how to respond to it. We even have the opportunity to learn how to live with two identities that belong to two kingdoms, this world and the world to come, both of which are created and cherished by God.” (171)

The season of Lent that we have entered into gives us the opportunity to learn how to respond to God's grace. Our passage today includes John 3:16 -- one of the most familiar passages in the Bible: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” And when it comes to the world, remember what Barnes said: “ We even have the opportunity to learn how to live with two identities that belong to two kingdoms, this world and the world to come, both of which are created and cherished by

God.” So, today we're going to continue talking about what it means to repent, which we have said has to do both with the world God loves, and how we can better become the persons God created each one of us to be.

We began reading from John 3:16, but these words from John's gospel do not just stand alone. There is a story which leads up to them which gives context and meaning. It is a story about Nicodemus and his encounter with Jesus. Nicodemus is mentioned in the beginning of chapter 3. He is a Pharisee and a member of the Jewish ruling council. The Pharisees were the teachers and interpreters of the Jewish law – the Torah. They created things like the interpretations of what the Ten Commandments meant in everyday life – things like what it meant to “remember the sabbath” by not working. But, for the most part, they distrusted Jesus because what he taught and did went against their understanding of what it meant to be a faithful Jew.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus “at night” when it is dark and not light – perhaps because he was afraid of what the other Pharisees might think. Nicodemus begins by saying to Jesus that he knew Jesus was a teacher from God because of the miracles he performs. But Jesus quickly redirects the conversation to talk about the kingdom of God being more than just miracles. Jesus says that it is about being “born again” by water and by God’s Spirit. However, Nicodemus misses the point. He is very literal about the impossibility of someone actually having a second physical birth. Jesus comments on his lack of understanding.

Jesus then talks about the “Son of Man” – a term Jesus often used to refer to himself. It was also a term used to point to the Messiah sent from God to save the world. Jesus ends up saying that “everyone who believes may have eternal life.” (John 3:15, NIV) It is then that we read the gospel writer John’s words: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son. . . to save the world through him . . .” John 3:16a, 17b, NIV)

We don’t know for sure how Nicodemus responds, but these words about why God gave Jesus and God’s desire to save the world may have had some effect on Nicodemus. The next time we hear of Nicodemus in John’s gospel is when the Pharisees are trying to arrest Jesus. Nicodemus is the only one who speaks up, questioning whether what they are doing with Jesus is a fair process. (John 7:50-51, NIV) Later in John’s gospel, the last time we see Nicodemus is after Jesus has been crucified and died on a Roman cross. It says that after Jesus has died, it is Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus who ask Pilate for Jesus’ body in order to bury him properly.

So, not only does the context of this story help us to better understand what these words mean from John 3:16 and the verses that follow. As we talked about last week, our context -- our life experiences, how we have been raised, our education or lack thereof, even where we were born - - all of these can affect how we hear and interpret scripture. And that's true for all of us.

For me, when I hear John 3:16, I can't help but remember memorizing this passage as a child. It was, in a sense, *the* passage in the Bible to know that could lead someone to becoming a Christian. On the other hand, I can also picture watching an NFL football game and seeing behind the goalpost as someone kicked a field goal, a guy in a rainbow-colored wig holding up a sign that said “John 3:16.” I guess he wanted people to read that verse in the Bible, who knows? But if I came out of another context with different experiences, I would probably hear this story

differently. One New Testament scholar talked about another way someone might hear this story of Nicodemus and the words that followed saying this:

The seriousness of this text's invitation was grasped by African American slaves. Nicodemus's nighttime visit to Jesus offered an important biblical precedent for their own worship gatherings. Slaves were allowed to participate in formal Christian worship only at their master's discretion; they were not allowed to have their own worship and rarely were allowed access to the Bible. Therefore, they held clandestine religious gatherings at night, a practice that continued after emancipation. The slaves saw in Nicodemus's night visit proof that it was possible to come to Jesus even when those in power forbade it. Nicodemus was a model, someone who was willing to act on his own against the will of the authorities. The slaves' faith surpassed that of Nicodemus. Nicodemus's night visit was only exploratory, and in this story in John 3, he does not understand the invitation Jesus extends to him. The slaves, by contrast, understood and embraced what Jesus had to offer. They were willing to risk their safety and their very lives to come to Jesus. The slaves are a powerful example of those who 'come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God'". (*New Interpreters Bible*, Vol. IX:555)

So, how do we hear these words, particularly the ones about coming out of the darkness and into the light? When it comes to this season of Lent as a time to repent, to think differently and to change our minds under the influence of God's Holy Spirit, what places in our lives might God be asking us to bring out of the darkness into the light of God's love and grace? Now remember that John 3:17 also reminds us of this: "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." God wants us to bring those things whatever they may be into the light of God's grace in order to be healed and made whole, and not to be condemned.

We all have many spiritual shortcomings and sins that we need to bring to the light of God's love, but I want to invite all of us to think in particular about our attitudes and actions toward those of other races. I know this is hard to talk about. And if there are parts of our lives that we need to change, I know it's easier in the short run to try to ignore those things and to keep them in the dark. But I want to invite us to trust God and to bring those things into the light of God's love so that they can be examined by God's Holy Spirit. And then under the guidance of God's Holy Spirit and the light of God's love we may be enlightened to change as God would have us to change. It is something that takes courage to do, but I believe through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, it can be done.

A number of years ago, there was a man named John Newton. You may have heard of him. He was born in London in 1725. He was the son of the commander of a merchant ship. At a young age John went off to sea with his father. When he was nineteen, he served on a man-of-war ship. Later he deserted the ship when he found the conditions to be awful. He was soon captured, and he agreed to serve on a slave ship as his penalty. Over time, he rose to be a captain of a slave ship.

Once when he was at sea, he was trying to steer his slave ship through a violent storm. John had some religious education as a child, but by this time in his life had given up on the whole thing. However, when he thought they would soon sink, he cried out to God saying, "Lord, have mercy on us." God heard his prayer, and they all survived the storm.

Later John would decide to leave the slave trade. He always remembered that date, May 10, 1748, as the date when God's saving grace became real to him. Over time, his conversion worked in his life. He later felt the call to be a pastor. John also had a gift for writing hymns. He wrote what may be the most popular hymn in the church today:

Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound)  
That sav'd a wretch like me!  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
Was blind, but now I see.

*Was blind, but now I see.* The story of John Newton is the story of someone whose life was blinded by the darkness and evil of sin and whose heart was not pure. He made his living transporting human slaves. But, through the mercy and the amazing grace of God, he was forgiven and set free – and his eyes were opened to the light so he could see God. Friends, I believe that same type of transformation is part of the ongoing process of becoming fully what God created each one of us to be.

Last year, we lost, John Lewis -- who served in Congress for many years representing Atlanta. You may remember that he was a significant part of the civil rights movement with Dr. King. It was very young Lewis who was at the head of the March across the Edmund Pettus bridge in Selma, Alabama. When they were attacked as they peacefully walked across the bridge, Lewis suffered severe injury to his head. He later said that he thought he would probably be killed that day. But the images of what happened there were broadcast across the airwaves, bringing light to the darkness, and the nation's heart began to change. It is interesting, as we have seen recently, that bringing things to the light can cause people's minds to change.

In his wonderful book on the life of John Lewis, *His Truth is Marching On*, which I recommend to you, author Jon Meacham tells of his conversation with Lewis only a few days before he died at his home in Atlanta. Meacham asked Lewis if he ever dreamed of the marches and what happened to him. This is what Lewis said:

I dream of marching, of singing. I hear the music of the movement in my dreams, and the sounds of our feet on the pavement, one after another. I don't have nightmares -- I don't relive the beatings in my dreams, at least not that I remember. I'm not sure why. Maybe in my mind the good forces are always at work. There is a power of the mind to believe and think on the higher drama of it, the higher things of it, the light, not the dark. We truly believed that we were on God's side, and in spite of everything -- the beatings, the bombings, the burnings -- God's truth would prevail. Sometimes I'll dream of a March, of moving forward, of light and warmth and happiness. And then I'll wake up and think, 'Oh, that was just a dream.' But you have to believe that it can be real, that it can be more

than a dream.” (*His Truth is Marching On: John Lewis and the Power of Hope* by Jon Meachum, 2020:245)

Maybe like John Newton or John Lewis -- we, too, have had some experience of the light of God’s grace and being saved. Maybe we would not use those exact words, but somewhere along the way we realized our need for God’s grace to save us from the sin and brokenness in our lives. Somehow, we came to understand that not only has God done this for us, but that we want to enter into a new relationship with God as a follower of Christ. We needed what Jesus described as a spiritual new birth in which God’s new life is poured into us. This brings about both forgiveness and a lifelong transformation into the person God created us to be.

So, friends come out of the darkness. Enter the healing, forgiving light of God’s grace. Do this so that God can use each one of us to help save this world that God created, and that God loved so much that he gave his own son, Jesus, to die on a cross in order that we might all walk in God’s light, not only in the world to come, but in this world – here and now!

In the strong name of God the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.