

IN THE DARK

JOHN 3:1-21

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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I want to talk this morning about darkness and light.

As a pastor I quite consistently try to steer people *away* from black and white approaches to life and faith.

I try to get people to consider other viewpoints, other theological perspectives, other ways of reading the bible.

I try to open the door—even if only a crack—to things like nuance and context.

I try to get people to move *toward* those they don't agree with, and maybe modify their positions slightly or at the very least consider that loving their neighbour is more important than convincing them.

In my writing I am often quite critical of those who operate in stark, binary categories where their story is the only true story, where “the other” is someone to be feared or insulted or condemned or disregarded.

I think this is vitally important in the world we live in. We live in polarized and polarizing times, whether we're talking about politics or social issues or theology.

We live in a world where it's becoming increasingly possible (and quite easy) to just constantly reinforce our own opinions in the media we consume and just shout at one another across the Internet. This is a road that is becoming increasingly well traveled.

I have a natural suspicion of people who walk around with very clear black/white categories in their heads, who are very certain that their way is the only way, that they are on the side of light while others are on the side of darkness.

People so convinced (including preachers!) have done a lot of damage throughout history. This is the road that leads to inquisitions and residential schools and heresy hunters.

Less sensationally but no less importantly, it is a path that tears churches and families apart. I've seen it. Perhaps you have, too.

So, all of this is to say that I spend a considerable amount of time and energy in what might be called "the grey zone" of faith and life.

There's only one small problem with all of what I have just said about the problematic nature of black and white categories in life and faith.

There are passages in the bible that lead me to believe that Jesus doesn't necessarily share my opinion. Like this morning's passage.

And when Jesus doesn't share your opinion... Well, then you have a problem.

In our text today, Nicodemus the Pharisee comes to Jesus, appropriately, in the dark. Under the cover of night.

One commentator called Nicodemus the "original night stalker."

We don't know with absolute certainty why Nicodemus came to Jesus in the dark, but we can probably make a few good guesses.

He's a Pharisee, a member of the Jewish ruling council. And while he might represent a subsection of this group who are interested in Jesus and open to his teaching, most of his colleagues would probably not be pleased to see him hanging out with Jesus.

The Pharisees opposed Jesus pretty consistently throughout his ministry, after all, and wouldn't look kindly on one of their own talking with this troublemaker, this heretic, this

blasphemer, this one who showed such flippant disregard for their laws and interpretations of laws.

The dark was also the traditional time when Torah was studied in depth. It was a time for theological discussion that wasn't constrained by the interruptions of the day.

I can imagine Nicodemus thinking he would have an interesting theological debate with an interesting teacher. Perhaps they will discuss the law. Perhaps they will discuss Jesus' identity. Perhaps they will talk about some of Nicodemus's apprehensions and doubts.

But that's not what he gets.

What he gets are some pretty stark and bewildering black and white categories!

No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again (or "anew" or "from above").

This verse that has spawned all kinds of "decisionism" in some circles of Christianity, whereby people attempt to separate "real" Christians from "fake" ones based on whether or not they've had a "born again" experience that they can point to with certainty.

No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.

A reference to baptism and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Or to acceptance of Jesus as the living water, as we see in John 4 with Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well.

And then Jesus gets to a more extended monologue – one we're all familiar with. "For God so loved the world..."

The lectionary reading stops at verse 17, but this is pretty arbitrary and it has the benefit of avoiding some of the hard things that Jesus says.

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.

And then, the passage concludes with this:

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.

The verdict is stark and clear.

Light and darkness. Whoever lives by the truth comes into the light.

Whoever believes is not condemned. Whoever does not believe stands condemned already.

Jesus seems quite a bit more comfortable with black and white categories than we do in the postmodern west

He seems more comfortable than I do.

So what do we do with this?

I offer the following not to avoid Jesus' hard words or to explain them away but to set them within the larger narrative and to help us avoid the persistent temptation to read Jesus' statements in isolation.

1. Context.

Jesus responds to *Nicodemus* in this way.

He knew the journey Nicodemus was on, and he knew what he needed to hear to move him toward the truth. He knew that Pharisees were perhaps most inclined to think that they could "manage God," that God's requirements could be reduced to laws and amendments to laws and amendments to amendments to laws... He knew that it was people that were used to being "on top" that most needed to be turned upside down, shaken up, reborn.

But this isn't the approach Jesus took with everyone.

He responds to the woman at the well in John 4 a bit differently.

He responds to a woman caught in adultery differently still. *Let whoever is without sin throw the first stone... Woman, where are your accusers? Has no one condemned you? Neither do I... Go leave your life of sin...*

He tells a story about—and implicitly praises—a tax collector that could do nothing more than lament his sins and wail, “Lord, have mercy.”

He tells a story about a lost son stumbling home after wasting his life and receiving a joyful welcome.

No human story is the same. No human story contains precisely the same doubts and fears and challenges and struggles and pride and sorrows and temptations.

Jesus knows this. And I am convinced that Jesus speaks precisely the word of grace and truth that is tailored each one of us at each point in our lives.

Jesus doesn't go around just mechanically unpacking a theological system full of abstract doctrines about God to whomever he meets. He says *what* needs to be said *when* it needs to be said to the *person* he's speaking to in that moment.

Sometimes we need to hear, “You must be born again! You must repent! You gotta turn everything upside down because the way you're living isn't working and won't end well!”

Sometimes we need to hear a simple word of mercy. “I love you. All is forgiven.”

2. Kingdom

Also, we should remember that Jesus is talking about the kingdom of God.

We quite easily substitute phrases like “no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again” with “no one can go to heaven after they die unless they are born again.”

These are not the same things.

The kingdom of God, as one commentator put it, “is a corporate concept and refers to the establishment of shalom, not just in souls but in bodies, not just for individuals but for communities, and not just for some after-death or post-apocalyptic future but for the here-and-now.”¹

We need only look at Jesus’ first “sermon” in Luke where he reads from the prophet Isaiah who predicted one who would come in the Spirit of the Lord to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind—to set the oppressed free and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” and then says “**Today**, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

The “kingdom of God” does not equal “heaven.” The kingdom of God is a present and a future reality. It has come, is coming, and will come in fullness.

Jesus is not telling Nicodemus how to go to heaven when he dies.

He is telling him that he has to be born again or born from above to accept, to enter, to participate in this kind of a kingdom, where old assumptions about who God is and how God works have to be set aside or modified or adjusted according to the new reality of Jesus—who he is and what he is bringing into the world.

3. Believe?

Ever since the Enlightenment, we in the west tend to think of belief almost primarily as “mental assent.” But the biblical understanding of this would have been much bigger and broader than mere acceptance of a claim.

There is a wide range of meaning in the Greek word translated “believe”:

- to think to be true
- to be persuaded of
- to credit
- to place confidence in
- conviction and trust

¹ <http://www.faith-theology.com/2017/03/born-again-sermon-for-second-sunday-in.html>

The word “believe” was a whole life word that involved not just what you thought about what was true in the world but what you did. We see this at the end of the passage when Jesus says:

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.

Jesus doesn’t say their “beliefs” were evil or everyone who “believes wrongly” hates the light. Jesus seamlessly goes between beliefs and deeds in this passage because he knows they cannot be separated.

The word “trust” seems to do a better job of linking what we think and what we do.

It seems to be a more active word than believe, to me. Trust implies that our fate is in the hand of another. It implies *reliance upon*. It could connote the idea of “clinging to” — even in the face of uncertainty.

When I get in an airplane, there is a great deal that I don’t know. I don’t have the first clue how to keep a big chunk of metal in the air across land and sea. I don’t understand the technology. I barely understand the basic principles. I don’t know how planes are engineered or maintained. I don’t know the steps that have to be taken by the pilots to ensure a safe flight. I don’t know how they troubleshoot.

But I **trust** that the one flying the plane knows more than I do and that he or she will get me where I need to go.

Trust is what we do in so many areas of our life where we don’t know much at all.

In fact, some scholars have suggested that one way to attempt to correct our western bias toward understanding “belief” primarily as a mental exercise, would be to replace “believe” and its derivatives in this passage with “trust.”

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever **trusts** 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 trusts in him is not condemned, but whoever does not trust stands condemned already because they have not trusted in the name of God's one and only Son.

4. Choose

But finally, after all this, we must not ignore the fact that Jesus meant what he said.

While the world of our experience is perhaps grey and complex, while we often feel like we're in the dark, our task is to always be moving toward the light.

Our task is always to be seeking to be born anew through the Spirit of God into the new kingdom reality that *has* come and will one day come in fullness.

Our lives are to be spent stepping away from darkness and into the light of Christ, not as a one time decision but as a way of life.

And the light, we must *always* remember, is not a theological system or a body of doctrine or a worldview or philosophy or a social ethic or a political agenda.

The light of the world is a person.

In the beginning was the Word..., John's gospel opens.

In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

The light is a person. And this person almost always makes things personal.

When people like Nicodemus and many others in the gospels come to him looking for a theological debate, it's remarkable how frequently Jesus turns the conversation back on the one asking the questions.

It's remarkable how often those seeking answers from Jesus end up being the ones who Jesus explicitly or implicitly is asking questions of.

Jesus does not leave us with abstract questions. He wants us to choose. *Who do you say that I am?*

Wherever we are on your journey, whether we feel like we're in the dark or we're perhaps a bit overconfident that we're basking in the light, Jesus comes to us and confronts us with the personal nature of his call.

Light and truth have come into the world. So what do you say?

Will you walk toward the light? Will you seek to live by the truth? Will you be born again, born from above?

The choice is ours.

It's interesting to track the character of Nicodemus throughout the rest of John's gospel.

He appears two more times.

The first time is in John 7 where Nicodemus defends Jesus in front of his colleagues who are trying to have Jesus disposed of.

The second time comes immediately after Jesus' crucifixion in John 19. Joseph of Arimathea—a "secret disciple of Jesus" has taken the body for burial.

Nicodemus joins Joseph, "bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds"—an extravagant and completely unnecessary amount.

Nicodemus, the Pharisee who came to Jesus in the dark is there at the end, publicly caring for Jesus' body.

My prayer is that each of our stories would seek to follow the same path from darkness to light.

And that we, like Nicodemus, would be there with Jesus in the end.

Amen.

