

Nicodemus

This story contains probably the most famous verse in the Bible. For God so loved the world God sent his only son to save the world.

You used to see John 3:16 on signs at sporting events and such, although I haven't so much lately.

But for all the familiarity of that verse, this is a complex story that is frankly kind of a headache to preach on.

There is just so much here and really the only way to preach it coherently is to pull a thread or two out and run with it. But that will mean leaving some things about the story untouched and still kind of puzzling.

I'm going to primarily pull out the thread of the dark/light theme. In John's gospel, light is equated with understanding and belief in who Jesus is and what he means for the world.

Belief is not just about intellectual agreement. Belief is about relationship...it's about tapping into the eternal life of God which an actual relationship with Jesus gives us. Real belief transforms lives.

I'll probably say this a whole bunch of times before we are through John. Neither eternal life nor condemnation are really primarily about what happens when we die. They're about what our source of life and strength is now.

What is our source of life and strength as we go through our day to day lives? Is it the deep, eternal, life in the Spirit that comes through Jesus? Or is it trusting the things of humans...the things of the world?

To think more about darkness and light, let's look more at Nicodemus. He comes to see Jesus under cover of night. Perhaps he felt that would be safer. He may have had concerns that being seen with Jesus might cause problems for him in his position.

But John also sets this story next to the story next week of the Samaritan woman at the well. She encounters Jesus in the brightest part of the day. Nicodemus goes away more confused than he started, still at least partly in the dark.

But the Samaritan woman believes Jesus and runs to tell her whole village who then also come to believe. Belief in Jesus...understanding who he is...changes not just her, but her whole village.

Not much seems to change for Nicodemus in today's story.

But this isn't the last we'll hear about Nicodemus. Later on, when the Sanhedrin and the priests begin to plot to kill Jesus, Nicodemus resists. He says we need to at least give him a hearing in accordance with the law.

And after Jesus' death, Nicodemus and a rich man named Joseph arrange to take down his body and give him a proper burial.

When we look at Nicodemus, we begin to see that the light and dark theme is not completely one or the other.

By even going to Jesus, Nicodemus shows a kernel of willingness to come into the light. To be honest, Jesus doesn't really make it that easy for Nicodemus. He talks about things that haven't even happened yet and somehow Nicodemus is supposed to know what he means.

Jesus also uses a Greek phrase that can either mean born again, born anew, or born from above. While the rebirth Jesus offers could be all three, Nicodemus seizes on the most literal...being physically born again.

He fades from this story not having fully come into the light. But he does appear to evolve over time. Church tradition, especially in the Orthodox church, holds that he was baptized later after Jesus' resurrection. We don't get that from the Bible. But we do get the story of a man who gradually comes more and more into the light.

Honestly, isn't that true of most of our faith stories? Some are truly struck with a blinding light and converted once and for all.

That's what happened to the Apostle Paul whose story we would have read today if we were using the common lectionary.

I don't know about you, but my story is a bit more like Nicodemus...sort of moving in and out of the light and the dark...moving in between belief and doubt. Over time, my faith life has become much more consistently about living in the light of that relationship with Jesus...belief has become more solid.

But that doesn't mean I always know what living in the light in a particular situation should look like. What I hang onto is the idea that within that relationship, Jesus can shine the light on what is mine to do in a world that sorely needs Jesus followers...and not just Jesus believers.

But whether I completely understand or not...whether I'm completely in the light...or weaving in and out...here's where that most famous verse comes into play. God so loved the world that God sent Jesus to save it...to save us...to save me.

Jesus was not sent to condemn the world. Whether we are more in the dark or the light – whether belief or doubt have the strongest foot hold in us, God loves us. God sent Jesus...to embrace us in a love that is eternal.

God so loved Nicodemus that Jesus was sent to save him. To draw him into the light. When Jesus says that those who don't believe are condemned already, he means that right now they are living in the dark of unbelief and separation from this relationship with God.

But that isn't a forever condemnation. And if Jesus was sent to save the whole world, living in the light just might mean trusting that somehow, Jesus will do just that.

Today we are baptizing Adeline Swanson. This is a good story for a baptism, even if it can seem a little obtuse.

We believe that baptism is all of the things Jesus probably meant when he spoke to Nicodemus. Baptism is being born anew...it's being born again...it's being born from above.

God will come to Adeline in the waters of baptism to give her a new life...a life in the spirit. Every day of her life, Jesus will call her into the light to follow him and live in God's kingdom.

What will that look like for her? What does it look like for us? We don't have to completely understand everything about Jesus to follow him, but it does help to learn what he taught. It helps to wrestle with the teachings of the Bible with other Christians. It helps to step out in service to the world God loves, even if you're not sure you've got it all figured out.

For me spending time in meditation...just time with Jesus in prayer and contemplation has had a pretty dramatic effect over the years.

Living into our baptism means being willing to step into the light...to be willing to face things about ourselves we'd rather not...to become aware of the things we'd rather keep in the dark. And then instead, be willing to turn from the darkness into the light of God's eternal love and life.

We conclude our baptism service by lighting a candle to give to the newly baptized. We tell her to carry that light into the world. We use the words of Matthew – Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to God.

Our sending hymn today is This Little Light of Mine in which we all remember that we too receive Christ's light daily in our lives. And daily we too are called to carry that light into the world. That same world that God loved so much, no sacrifice was too great.