

Out From The Shadows

John 3:14-21

Preparing a sermon – delivering a sermon - on John 3:16 does make me tremble a bit. Really, what more can be said about these verses - verses that have been used as the centerpiece of so much of Christianity. This is probably the very reason we need to look at this passage again and again, to try and reclaim its meaning, to understand the context as it relates to our own context.

The text for today is not the whole scene, it is just some of the theologizing that Jesus does for Nicodemus as Nico comes late in the night, in the dark, to see Jesus...And while these words are coming from the mouth of Jesus, it is also good to remember that they are also coming from the writer of John who wrote it at least 60 years after the death of Jesus. By this time, the writer had his own understanding of who Jesus was, what Jesus was about and what his message was.

Jesus uses some strange imagery to set up the well-known verse, John 3:16: Moses and the snake lifted up in the desert. Let's take a short detour to look at the back story. Jesus is using the scriptures of his own faith when he refers to the book of Numbers, 21.

The children of Israel are wandering in the desert and have just won a battle over a mean and nasty Canaanite king. After the euphoria dies down, the Israelites look around and notice again how hard life is in the desert. They long for the "security" of Egypt. They whine and complain about how Moses has brought them out to this God-forsaken place; there is no water, there is no bread, the food is terrible, and they are just tired of the whole scene.

God hears this and wonders how they, a covenant people, can even speak about being "God- forsaken." It is as if God says "I'll show you God-forsaken" and God sends poisonous snakes among them. Lots of people get bitten, get sick, and many die. Now the people complain about the snakes but they also apologize for whining and talking bad against God. "Please ask God to do something about these snakes."

So Moses, as he so often has to do, goes back to God and asks for help. Moses gets these strange instructions to form a snake and put it on top of a high pole. The people are to look at the bronze snake, on the pole, and then they will be inoculated against the snake bites. Look at the snake, the dangerous thing that you are scared of and that is the saving anti-venom.

Can you make the leap, make the connection as to why we so often insert the cross into this passage in John, even though it is not referred to? We imagine Jesus high on a cross, like the snake on a pole. We look to his violent death and we are saved from death ourselves. It is not exactly how I understand this passage at this point in my life. But it is one prevalent view of what is going on in John 3:16.

But now back to Nicodemus and Jesus. In John's gospel, this is the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Jesus is already so well known that a high ranking member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council over the people of Israel, comprised of both Pharisees and Sadducees, knows about him. The ruckus Jesus created in the temple - knocking over tables and driving animals out of the courtyard, might have something to do with that.

So, here comes scared Nicodemus. He is intrigued by what Jesus is saying, he wants to hear more but he can't risk being seen with this rebel rouser who is known as a "renewer" of the tradition. Nicodemus has a reputation to uphold as a leader of the faith, a "keeper" of the tradition. So he comes creeping out of his prayer closet in the dark of night. Being seen fraternizing with Jesus, someone who is challenging the system, could seriously jeopardize Nicodemus' work and image.

Jesus does not say, "No, Nicodemus, I can't meet with you in the middle of the night." James Alison, a Jesuit priest and theologian writes, "neither does Jesus pander to Nicodemus coming to him by night, allowing himself to be flattered by the attention." They just sit together in the dark as Nicodemus tries to understand Jesus' new way of

talking about faith. But even in the protection of darkness Nicodemus does not allow himself to understand the metaphors Jesus uses. Long-suffering Jesus finally gets impatient, “You are a teacher of Israel, you are trained in this stuff and you still don’t get it?”

Jesus’ gives Nicodemus a direct challenge, “Everyone who makes a practice of doing evil, addicted to denial and illusion, hates God-light and won’t come near it, fearing a painful exposure. But anyone working and living in truth and reality welcomes God-light so the work can be seen for the God-work it is” (The Message Bible, John 3:20-21).

If Nicodemus wants to be a disciple, if he really is interested in connecting to God in this new way through Jesus’ teaching, then he can’t do it only in the hiddenness of night. Alison writes, “Jesus knows that to have desires by night, which are in contradiction with desires of the day, are signs that both are distorted. He gives it to Nicodemus straight: there is no such thing as a closet disciple.” Nicodemus is invited to take the risk, come out in the daylight.

We only meet Nicodemus two more times in John and he is still more comfortable in the shadows. In chapter 7:50-52, he mildly protests to the other Pharisees that maybe Jesus shouldn’t be accused and condemned before they have heard all the facts. When Nicodemus is accused by the other pharisees of defending Jesus, he clams up.

Then after Jesus is killed, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, another follower who would rather not be known publicly, take Jesus’ body and wrap it with a whole lot of expensive spices. It is just before nightfall, not quite dark. Only in death do these secret disciples venture into the almost light to share their wealth with Jesus. Nicodemus and Joseph, both high ranking Pharisees, never really come out. They do not experience the power of walking with Jesus, the word made flesh, in the light of day.

What about us? What does it look like to come out of the shadows toward the “truth and reality” as Jesus says?

May we all live out in Christ so that our true and authentic selves are defined and illuminated by the Light. Amen.

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