

Rev. Joan Pell
 Sierra Pines United Methodist Church
 Sermon: 03/11/2018
 Series: Wilderness Wonderings on the Way of Love
 Scripture: John 3:14-21



Illuminating Faith

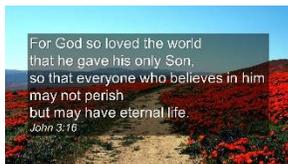


<John 3:14-21 NRSV>

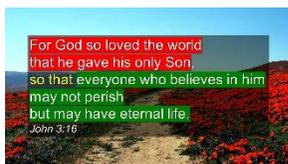
14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

17 "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19 And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. 20 For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21 But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

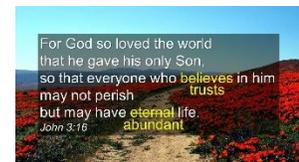


John 3:16. Say it with me: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* Have any of you memorized that verse in some translation at some time in your lives? Even if you have never memorized it, I'm sure you have come across the reference: John 3:16. It is popular on t-shirts, it is on *In-N-Out* soda cups, underneath. And on *Forever 21* bags on the bottom. It is frequently lifted up as a verse that **illuminates** and sums up the Christian faith. It speaks of our personal salvation.

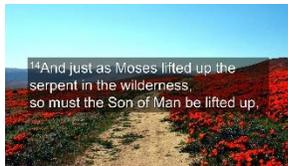


The premise is two-fold: God loves the world so much to risk sending his Son here *and* if you believe in Jesus, you will have eternal life. The word used for "believe" can be better translated as trust and "eternal life" refers to the abundant life we find in the

Kingdom of God both here and later. So the verse is saying, *if you place your whole trust in Jesus, you will have abundant life.*



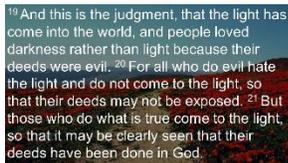
We miss so much additional meaning when we take single verses out of the context that they were placed. So we are going to look today at what else in our overall passage sheds light on this one cherished verse. THREE observations.



ONE. We started our reading at v14 with a mention of Moses lifting up a serpent, sometimes translated snake. This is a reference back to Numbers 21:4-9. It goes back to the Israelites who after their escape from Egypt wandered for 40 years in the wilderness. They kept complaining to Moses and God about everything that was going wrong. Each time they didn't trust God and complained, God provided a solution. We have the story of the manna and the quail, and the pillar of fire, and the water out of rock. This time, some fiery venomous snakes entered their camp and bit them, which they equated with God punishing them for complaining. They ask Moses to do something about it, and God told Moses to tell them to erect a bronze replica of a snake on a pole. Anyone bitten by a snake was to look up at the pole and they would be healed. That's the origin of the symbol of a snake on a pole that is still used today by the medical profession. **The thing that had hurt them was used to heal them.** As they looked up the snake, they would remember their complaining and trust in God for their healing and for what they needed for their journey to the Promised Land. Looking at what caused their destruction would lead to life. The snake can hurt or heal.



In the same way also as Christians, we look at the cross and its scandal and we see life. Christ is our healer lifted up and we see grace, mercy, forgiveness, and love.¹ There's a hymn whose lyrics go: **Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim.** We are going to sing it shortly. Yes, it's counterintuitive and paradoxical. Looking at the cross forces us to face our desire to dwell in dark places and invites us to step into the light.



TWO. Which brings us to vv19-21 which use the imagery of light and darkness. Back in the verses before today's scripture reading in John 3:1-13, Nicodemus, the Pharisee, comes in the dark of night to ask Jesus some questions. Nicodemus was afraid to be seen. Then he had a hard time grasping the concept of being born again and how much God loves us. The verses we read today are a continuation and the conclusion of their conversation. The gospel writer John at the start of the gospel has already equated Jesus as being the light of the world. So Jesus' words to Nicodemus continue to use the metaphor of darkness and light as Jesus tells Nicodemus that when we do evil thing, we are living in darkness and the solution is to come into the light, or to come to Jesus.



Dark and light are a metaphor and they represent Night/day, Evil/good, Sin/Righteousness, Deceit/Honesty, Falsehood/Truth. Stepping into the light means being vulnerable. We want to keep our bad habits hidden and are pretty adept at rationalizing our own actions. But when we love the darkness and refuse to come

¹ John van de Laar, "Choosing Light" in *Sacredise Blog* (March 14, 2012), <http://sacredise.com/blog/?p=1127>

into the light we are judged in that we cannot find healing, forgiveness and restoration. Loving the darkness means we deny our brokenness. When we come to the light we can be healed and liberated from our sin, brokenness and self-centeredness. To live in the light means trusting Jesus to bring forgiveness and healing, and then we will find abundant life. As our relationships are healed, we then become those who bring light and healing to others.

The only chance of healing dark secrets like abuse and alcoholism are to expose those secrets to the light and ask for help and surround ourselves with support. We all have something that we'd prefer to keep quiet that we don't want others scrutinizing. Perhaps it is relationship where trust has been broken and hurtful things said or done. Or perhaps it is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit that we are not producing in our interactions at home or at work: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Which of those do you struggle with?



All this talk of light/dark reminds me of my time a couple of years ago visiting my brother in Australia. I was in Queensland but at the weekend, we travelled down to the state of New South Wales. I even stood with one foot in each state. Half of me was at 5pm and the other half at 6pm because they are in 2 different time zones.

At the hotel, which was just in NSW, there were signs everywhere reminding us that early morning alarm calls, breakfast and checkout time were all on New South Wales time, not Queensland time. We could even walk around the parking lot and our cell phones would flip flop across time zones as they connected to the two different cell towers. There was exactly the same amount of daylight of course between one side of the town and the other, but naming time is man's way of ordering the day. We opted to keep ourselves on Queensland time as we were only going to stay overnight and for part of the following day before driving back. As we cooked lunch on one of the



beachside BBQs, a foreign tourist with limited English came up to ask the time. When I showed him my watch, I had to try to explain that it was only 11am, not the Noon that my watch said "**We cannot control the light, but we can position ourselves in relationship to it.**"²



The next day we drove to the most easterly point of the Australian mainland where there is a lighthouse. The lighthouse of course is a beacon of light that shines in the darkness to guide the ships on their journey. **As we ourselves receive the light of Christ in our lives we can become beacons of light in the darkness for others.**

As we left to return after lunch, we drove up the Gold Coast to Surfer's Paradise. That's the most commercialized area on the coast with tall skyscrapers filling the horizon. In fact, there are so many tall buildings, that the beach is in shade for much of the day and

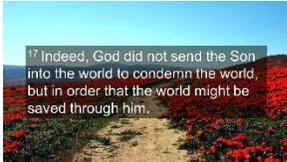
² Janet Hunt, "Light and Darkness" in *Dancing with the Word Blog* (March 8, 2015), <http://words.dancingwiththeword.com/2015/03/the-light.html>



you can choose whether to be in the sun or not. Now our metaphor breaks down a bit here, because sometimes the shady area is a gift. But sticking with our metaphor: **We cannot control the light, but we can choose whether to stand in the light.**



And as with the lighthouse, those sky rise buildings up and down the coast looked beautiful at night. **We can stand in the darkness and be a light that brings beauty to the lives of others**



¹⁷ Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

THREE. But that brings us to the last verse that we are going to look at: v17. *Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

We are not the only ones invited to step into the light. God wants everyone to live in the Kingdom. Eternal life is not just for after death, it begins now. We don't get to pick who is with us. All of creation is worthy of salvation. We could be standing next to a convicted killer, a prostitute, or someone whose politics and world view set our teeth on edge! The way of God doesn't make sense compared to the way the world orders good and bad. Perhaps we are tempted like Nicodemus to slink off into the darkness scratching our heads!³



We can't take v16 apart from v17. There is not just personal salvation; **God wants to save the whole world.** And so, the cross, the representation of sin and its consequences **becomes by faith** the source of healing and hope for the world.

Thanks be to God.
Amen.

Resources

Bartlett, David L. and Barbara Brown Taylor, Eds. *Feasting on the Word*. Year B, Vol. 2. Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.

³ Sharron R. Bleazard, "Living in the Light" in *Stewardship of Life Blog* (March 12, 2015), <http://www.stewardshipoflife.org/2015/03/living-in-the-light/>