



**St. Andrew's By-the-Sea**  
*The Episcopal Church*  
*in Destin, Florida*

“Nicodemus went in the dark”  
Lent 4B – March 10, 2024  
Mark 1:21-28

A Homily by The Rev'd Jo Popham

“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.” John 3:16 is probably the most quoted of all the New Testament. But as always, we need to keep this as in all scripture in contextual perspective – context, context, context.

We must remember the context of John – 1) what was happening before this passage that is the world behind the text, 2) the world of the text - when these events actually happened, and 3) our world view as we interpret these words now – in the world in front of the text. Looking at the Gospel of John in our day we see the apparent anti-Semitism in the Gospel according to John. And that view must be resisted. I fear much harm has been done by the misinterpretation of this Gospel. Indeed when reading it aloud I often replace the word Jews with “religious authorities.” Because in the context of the world of the text, it was the Jewish authorities in the employ of the Romans who persecuted Jesus and later the new Christian community. Three decades after Jesus was crucified, the evangelist was recalling that Jesus was persecuted by the Jewish authorities; he wrote to people who themselves were being persecuted for believing that Jesus was the Christ. The purpose of the Gospel according to John through writing of Jesus's life, his teachings, his signs, and at the last his death and resurrection – the purpose was and is to turn our hearts so that we will believe that Jesus is the Son of God sent into the world to save us.

Today's reading was addressed to Nicodemus, someone who knew Torah, knew the Bible well. He came in the dark of night, so that he would not be seen by the authorities, his peers. He was a wealthy aristocratic Pharisee, Jewish teacher, likely a member of the Sanhedrin. And in response to a question posed by Nicodemus, Jesus gave him – and us – John 3:16.

Nicodemus wanted to believe that Jesus was from God, but he just did not fully understand. Jesus tells him that “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born *anōthen*, to use the Greek. In Greek, *anōthen* means both “from above” and “again” or “anew.” Our NRSV translation uses the meaning “born from above” while the NIV uses “born again.” Most modern theologians trust that John intended for the reader to hear both meanings: born “anōthen” meaning both “born from above” and “born anew.” But if we take being “born again” as the requirement to being saved, we do so at our own peril for we are excluding others if they do not pass the test of being “born again” Christians when indeed we all are saved already. Consider the context and do not limit God’s love, my friends.

I wonder if we have focused on the wrong bit of Jesus’s answer to Nicodemus’s questions. Why would we use this text to exclude anyone – to turn anyone away from the love of God? Why indeed?

Do we human creatures of God put seemingly impossible obstacles before others who want to live as God’s loved ones? Do we? Do we really believe that unless we confess that we believe in Jesus in a certain manner, that God’s love will be withheld from us?

Do we really believe that God sent Jesus because God loves us and people LIKE us? Do we think that some others are not worthy of that kind of love from God?

Maybe that works for some, if we are thinking only about the educated literate adults who have access to the Word of God as filtered through a certain evangelical lens. Is that what 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians believed? Not many people in the young Christian movement were literate or even had access to the word of God written or spoken.

Do we really think that of the nearly 7 billion on earth, that God loves only those who embrace John 3:16 – that only the small portion of “born again” among the total 33% of the Christian population worldwide are saved?

Do we think that if a person is not baptized that they actually will be barred from heaven – will not benefit from the promise of eternal life?

And why must someone pass a certain test to become believers to be saved?

Entrance into the kingdom is not something we can accomplish on our own, our faith doesn't save us. Only God can save us.<sup>1</sup> And God already has saved us!

Yes, we along with so many, consider John 3:16 the heart of the Gospel. But read on!

“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. (John 3:17)

God initiated salvation. It is up to God to determine who is saved. And all people have the promise of salvation.

My sisters and brothers, how could God choose some of us and not others. Yes, we do have to choose to live in God's light – to let God's grace wash over us, but there is “room in the light for all of God's beloved creation.”<sup>2</sup>

I don't want you to misunderstand. I am not trivializing John 3:16, not at all. This one verse encapsulates all of the Gospel according to John. Yet, it also should not be taken out of context.

Jesus explained God's loves us to Nicodemus. “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.” Yes, God loves us so much. But in the Greek, the word for “so” also means in this way, in this manner. Yes, God's love is infinite, but the point here is not how much, but how – God gave us Jesus, the son of God. Out of God's great love we were made. And out of love, God gave us the means for our salvation – Jesus. By God's grace and great love for us – all our trespasses – all our sins – are forgiven. God so loved the world – God loved the world “in this way” – that even the enemies of God – those opposed to Christianity – are saved.<sup>3</sup> What a model for us Christians! We were all given the gift of God's son and light came into the world.

Do we humans run from the light? Yes, often we do. (Being from the deep south, the image that keeps coming to mind is cockroaches scurrying when the lights are turned on.) Being exposed, being vulnerable, even by the loving and grace-filled light of Christ, runs counter to human nature. We want to keep our desires, our not-so-pretty mannerisms, our

selfish ways hidden in the shadows. And some of us have adapted well to the darkness. But aren't we called to live in the light, exposed, to be challenged to accept that all people are saved? New flash – there is room in the light for all of God's creation!<sup>4</sup> Can we accept that in God's light we might be standing shoulder to shoulder with “a convicted killer, a prostitute, or someone whose politics and world view may set your teeth on edge”?<sup>5</sup> Can we stand in the light with all God's people? A friend and fellow classmate from seminary describes those welcome in God's house where he is privileged to serve as those searching, saved, black, brown, white, gay, straight, sure, unsure, older, younger, peace-filled, pain-filled, able bodied or differently abled, no matter how many moms or dads or divorces or kids or chromosomes or failures or successes or questions you have... no matter your gender or status or where you are from.<sup>6</sup> Everyone, everyone is welcomed into the light of Christ!<sup>7</sup>

We are blessed to know the rest of the story. Nicodemus came in the dark to get to know more from this Jesus he had heard so much about. He became a true believer. And after Jesus's death, when our Lord's intimate disciples were hiding in the dark for fear of the authorities, Nicodemus went with Joseph of Arimathea to the tomb, bringing with him an excessive amount of expensive burial herbs to anoint Jesus's body.<sup>8</sup> Nicodemus came to pay his last respects to his savior and the savior of all the world in broad daylight.

Step into the light, my friends. Do not come to Jesus in the dark of night!

Lord, may it be true. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Bishop Andy Doyle' blog “Hitchhiking the Word” <http://hitchhikingthebible.blogspot.com>.

<sup>2</sup> The Rev. Sharron Riessinger Blezard an ELCA pastor in the Lower Susquehanna Synod, “Living in the Light” March 12, 2015, <https://www.stewardshipoflife.org/2015/03/living-in-the-light>.

<sup>3</sup> To John, God and Jesus are one and the same, so the how, the manner in which we are loved is that God gave Godself as a living sacrifice. Somewhere somehow a mistranslation occurred (perhaps in the Latin Vulgate Bible) that read “only begotten son,” linking Jesus's ministry to the miraculous virgin birth. But remember that in the Gospel according to John there is no birth narrative at all, because, of course, Jesus preexisted with God. And “Everyone who believes [in Jesus], the only son of God” appears to make belief or unbelief a human opportunity to reject or accept.

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<sup>4</sup> The Rev. Sharron Riessinger Blezard an ELCA pastor in the Lower Susquehanna Synod, “Living in the Light” March 12, 2015, <https://www.stewardshipoflife.org/2015/03/living-in-the-light>.

<sup>5</sup> *Living the light*, March 12, 2015 By Sharron R. Blezard, an ELCA pastor and theologian.

<sup>6</sup> Thanks to the Facebook posting of the Reverend Jim Trimble, Rector of St. John’s Episcopal Church in Honeoye Falls, New York, for these reminders of with whom we stand in the light.

<sup>7</sup> This is how I have described the constancy of God’s presence to children and adults, too. God is like a spotlight on stage. We could be standing in God’s light and feel the heat of the intense light on our faces, but we sometimes, maybe often, step out of the light. But God’s light is still there. Always there. And we can choose to step back into the light. But if I don’t, I trust that you will show me where the light is, or drag me back into God’s light. And I promise to do the same for you. That is why we live in Christian community, so that we can show one another the light of Christ.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph had given his own new tomb to provide a decent burial for Jesus’s body, saving it from further desecration.