

Advent 2023: Third Sunday of Advent

The Light from Christ's Cross

John 3:1-21

Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on December 17th, 2023.

Scared of the Dark

It was 1998 and I was about two and a half years into my first full time job as a youth pastor. I made chicken scratch, a whopping four figures annually. To offset the cost and be faithful to the calling, I moved into the building the church had just built. I lived up on the second floor.

The church had been built on-the-cheap. The senior pastor there was a notorious tightwad. A lot of work had been donated. And at night, that building made sounds. I remember a lot of restless nights with a softball bat next to the bed or even next to me in the bed.

If I came home to my little room upstairs in the church after dark, I would sprint from the stairs to the light switch on the opposite wall. Early on, I was walking through the darkness – this was pre-cell phones, so no handy flashlight – and heard something. I turned around and a bat flew past my head. Making a midnight sojourn the potty would scare the heebie jeebies out of me. I would debate exactly how badly I needed relief.

Once, a local mall closed down and one of the big anchor stores was selling off everything in the store. Clothing racks, decorations, benches, storage bins, everything. The tightwad pastor worked a deal out to let us wander through for two hours and take whatever we wanted for free. So, I was pressed into service hauling those massive circular racks to hang clothing on as well as huge inventory bin units. Also, in the children's section, there was a six-foot-tall stuffed Bert and Cookie Monster from Sesame Street. He took those too.

Cookie Monster was soft and cute. But Bert was terrifying. Like, haunt your nightmares. He had that unibrow that made him look furious. And he was as tall as me. One night late, I realized that I needed to get a few supplies and was determined to head out. Because the stairwell had been painted, I was using the elevator, which was installed so cheaply that the light inside of it flickered a lot. It needed to come with a strobe warning.

I walked over in the darkness, the building groaning as it settled, and pushed the button. At that point, I thought I was used to the darkness, so I did not turn on any lights. The door opened. Some teenagers had propped up Bert against the door so that when it opened, he fell out onto me. I screamed and wrestled Bert and eventually won. I sat there, panting, heart racing, sweating and thought that I had almost died there.

Living a life in darkness is exhausting. But worse than that, the darkness convinces you that you are fine. It becomes so familiar that you don't realize how awful it is. It is a spiritual darkness that we are unable to do anything about. The worst version of spiritual darkness may be people inside the church who are convinced that they are Christians. They may be in church so much that they feel like they live there! But spiritually speaking they are in darkness still.

Ask yourself if you think you are going to heaven, why? Why should you get to go to heaven? There is an answer to that question. And there are a lot of wrong answers or incomplete answers. And if you are stuck in spiritual darkness, even if you are a lifelong church attender, the answer needs to change. Jesus can help us with that. I invite you to John 3:1-21. (read text)

The Light of Men

In the first chapter, the Apostle John gave us a glimpse of Jesus and his mission when he wrote, "in him was life, and that life was the light of men." (John 1:4) In chapter two, John wrote about Jesus cleansing the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus knew that many were watching him. And now in the third chapter, Nicodemus steps forward. He is not some random observer of Jesus. He is a representative of those in Jerusalem who had witnessed the work of Jesus.

Further, Nicodemus represents an institution within Judaism: the rabbis or teachers of the law. He represents the darkness that comes along with the lostness many people within religion struggle with.

We talk often about the darkness of sin and the darkness of being lost, unsaved, concerning those outside the church. But Nicodemus is a reminder that there are many, many people who sit in church week after week and they are as spiritually lost as a ball in tall grass. They are trapped in the darkness of religious systems,

trapped by legalistic activity that convinces a person that they must be going to heaven because they do all of the things they were taught in church to do!

Nicodemus had been trained. He specialized in knowing the law. He led in synagogue worship and instruction. He served Jerusalem as a spiritual guide. Matthew, Mark and Luke record many struggles with these men. This is Jesus's first encounter with one in John's gospel.

John indicates that Nicodemus is also a member of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was a religious legislative body. It could appoint both a king and a high priest. It could declare war. It could expand the territory, change maps, and it also bring false prophets to justice through a trial. Nicodemus was also a Pharisee and is a distinguished teacher. He will appear two more times in John's gospel defending Jesus's interests: first at the feast of Tabernacles in chapter 7 and later at Jesus's burial with Joseph of Arimathea in chapter 19. In each instance, Nicodemus is a unique blend of curiosity, courage, and timidity.

He is a teacher of some fame. Jesus even refers to him as "the teacher of Israel." Not "a teacher." "The teacher of Israel." Nicodemus had a distinguished reputation in Jerusalem. He was as knowledgeable and pious a person as you could find. He had grown up going to synagogue and had memorized huge portions, if not a majority, of the Old Testament. He was esteemed, influential, important, and steeped in religiosity. But despite all of that, spiritually speaking, Nicodemus was still "in the dark."

He was someone who knew all of the church-y stuff, he knew the code words, he knew the traditions, he knew it all, and yet, he was living in darkness. You can be extremely religious and still be spiritually in darkness. You can get used to all of the systems and you can be familiar with all of the traditions and rules to follow. But until you step into the light of Jesus, it is all just darkness.

I went to college with a friend named Andy. If you had asked any of us if Andy were a Christian, we would have said, absolutely. Andy knew the Bible. He was in leadership on campus. He worked in church ministries! He was respected by faculty and students. And two years after we graduated, while he was leading a youth ministry training retreat, he was saved. I was shocked.

When he told me he wanted to pray to receive Christ, I simply said, “Talk to me, pal. What’s going on?” He said that all of his life he had pursued church stuff with zeal and that he grew up doing what he thought he was supposed to do for God. He likened his testimony to Paul’s, in that Saul was convinced he was doing right by God and right by his religion. But at some point, Andy realized that the light of Christ had not ever pierced his darkness.

Now, I tried to do my level-best to dissuade him – surely, he was confused, overcome with emotion. I tried to downgrade his decision from salvation to redecoration. He looked at me and said, “Craig, what are you doing? I don’t need to replace a part or two. I need a brand-new machine. I am lost and I need to chase Jesus with the same intensity and passion that I followed church.” Andy needed to step out of the darkness and into the light from Christ’s cross.

Nicodemus Steps Into the Light

John tells us that Nicodemus comes to Jesus at “night.” The concept of “night” is a theological symbol used often by John. In this instance, it is not just the time of day that Nicodemus visits Jesus. It also expresses the spiritual relation that Nicodemus had to the Truth. He was in the darkness of night concerning truth.

Often, when John refers to night and darkness, he is referring to realms of evil, untruth and unbelief (9:4; 11:10). In John’s gospel, the only other person who comes to Jesus at night is Judas Iscariot, who also departs again into the night in his betrayal of Jesus (13:30). Nicodemus is a man of the darkness while Jesus IS the Light. John says this plainly in v. 19. Jesus is the light who has come into the world but sadly, people prefer the darkness. However, Nicodemus makes a serious choice to step out of the darkness and into the light.

It is no coincidence that when the Apostle Paul was saved, it was the blinding light of Christ that moved Saul from spiritual darkness into life. Here, Nicodemus is taking his first steps out of the spiritual darkness of that religious system and learning how to step into the light.

Notice how Nicodemus wants to approach the conversation from that religious system. He is trying to engage Jesus theologically. A lot of people in church do that. They are trying to “religify” their way to heaven.

They want to “relifly away to heaven, oh glory!” He wants to try to understand Jesus in this old, established, theological framework that has kept him in darkness.

Jesus does not join Nicodemus there. He forces Nicodemus to stop hiding behind the legalism of religion and moves the rabbi to another level. Jesus isn't interested in talking about the authority from which he teaches and acts. He wants to know about the reality of the relationship between Nicodemus and God.

You may be here this morning and you are trapped in a legalistic understanding of religion. You are focusing on “doing the do's and don'ting the don'ts.” You have done everything a person is supposed to do to perpetuate the image of a “Christian.” But today you need to consider your relationship status. Where are you exactly with Jesus?

Earlier I asked you a question about why you believe you would go to heaven. If your answer included any of that religiosity, you need to listen very, very carefully. If you worked through a laundry list of do's and don'ts, if you were checking all of the good things you've done, and nowhere in there was a thought or acknowledgement of a relationship with Jesus Christ, you may need to step out of the darkness of religion and into the light from Christ's cross.

Nicodemus is being forced to keep up with Jesus's lead or fall back into the darkness. Nicodemus had been taught and believed that because he was born a Jew, he would one day live in a final kingdom that was ruled by a descendent of King David. Judaism taught that only Jews who kept the law faithfully would be admitted freely to this kingdom. Maybe you think that way too. You were born into heaven because you were born into a family that went to church. You think you are born into it. That is darkness thinking. Consider what Jesus tells Nicodemus as you step closer to the light.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that there is a new prerequisite to enter this Kingdom. It has nothing to do with your physical birth. Instead, it depends on your spiritual second birth. Jesus says that you must be “born again.” The word used can either mean “again” or “from above.” John uses “from above” often as his usual meaning.

But Nicodemus sees it as again, while Jesus is teaching him the other. Nicodemus is caught up trying to religify his way through this whole “born again” conundrum.

How is a person born again? Nicodemus gets into some human physiology. Can a person re-enter his mother’s womb? You go and try to float that idea past Salena Loizos or Lis Darling or Julie Miller – want to go for round two with that baby? You’ll walk away with a limp.

In essence, Nicodemus is asking a crucial, incredibly important question – one that I think is appropriate to ask at Christmas time. How does a person completely start over? How does a person experience complete, comprehensive, renewal of the whole, entire person? We aren’t adding another part here. This is a complete renewal of the whole nature.

Jesus is telling Nicodemus that there is nothing within us that works correctly. Everything within us is broken in darkness. We need to step into the light and experience a new birth from above, in the Spirit. The light of the cross of Christ will light the way to this new life for us.

In the light of what Christ has done for us on the cross, we must submit to the baptism of repentance that John the Baptist taught. Following repentance we can experience the Holy Spirit of God and then transformation – we can become brand new. We can start over.

Poor Nicodemus is baffled and disturbed here. All of his religious categories and accomplishments have been turned upside down. Nicodemus had been committed to the Torah and to obedience. He had been committed to prayer and sacrifice. All of that was inadequate, broken by the darkness. Even Nicodemus’s basic understanding of salvation, responsibility and privilege of being Jewish had been challenged and found lacking. He is, for the first time, able to see something brand new in the light of Christ.

The problem for Nicodemus up to this point had been his refusal, and the refusal by the rest of the people who made up the “we” he mentioned earlier, to receive the testimony about Jesus and believe. It is not a problem of knowledge. Everything Nicodemus needed to believe was already provided – both the Scriptures and the signs. But up until this point, he could not understand and believe.

And if he cannot understand and believe the Scriptures and the testimony of Jesus, it is not possible for him to believe the profound heavenly things.

A lot of people stuck in that religious darkness are constantly tripping over the basic teachings of Jesus. They want to talk the processes, the traditions, the systems, the legalistic activity. They are constantly, like Nicodemus had been, stumbling over these first teachings and therefore are unable to grasp the deeper realities they wish they understood. Jesus tells Nicodemus it is time to be born from above, born again, and then he tells him where to look to find that answer. He tells you too.

You want to start over? You want to be brand new? Do you want, this Christmas, to experience a complete, comprehensive life-change? Don't look out to the stars. Don't even look down to the cradle. Look up to the light of Christ's cross.

Jesus tells Nicodemus "look up." Jesus refers to a story in Numbers 21 when Moses build a serpent of bronze and raised it up so that Israelites who had been bitten by poisonous snakes in the desert might see the bronze snake and be healed. In the same way, Jesus says that he too will be "lifted up" in order to become our source for healing and eternal life for all who believe.

The word here that we translate as "lifted up" can also be translated as "ascent" and it is used both ways here. Jesus will "ascend" or be "lifted up" to the cross and the light of the cross that was a place of Christ's glorification will become our place of justification, our place of salvation.

Do you want to start over, have a new life, be completely transformed? Look up to Christ and look up to the cross.

Reading further, we understand that God loved the world so much that he sent his One and only Son, Jesus Christ, to ascend, be lifted up to the cross, and anyone who would look to him and believe in that truth, will live forever.

Nicodemus had to be shaken again. Judaism never spoke of God's love for the world outside of Israel. And yet, here we read that God's love extends beyond the limits of race, nation, geography.

God's love also extends beyond the limits of religiosity. God loves the world with the selfless, costly love of redemption.

What does this have to do with the manger and the cradle and shepherds and all of the rest of this holiday? Jesus was born to come into the world and save everyone. The hope of Christ's star led to the love in Christ's cradle and that was illuminated through the light of Christ's cross.

Jesus came to provide renewal and change to a broken people who embrace darkness habitually. People who are completely broken. People who look at their lives and wonder, "how in the world can I ever be made brand new?"
How?

Look up, to the cross, and let Jesus light your way to a brand-new life.