This Is The Verdict — Delivery Transcript

John 3:16–21 (ESV) · Wes Terry · Saturday, December 24, 2022 · *Standalone Sermons — 2022*

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> ⚠️ ***AUTO-GENERATED TRANSCRIPT — verify against the audio before quoting publicly.*** *Produced from a Descript transcription of the Broadview Church sermon recording and lightly cleaned (filler words removed, obvious mis-hears of names and Scripture references corrected). No timestamps. This is Wes's Christmas Eve message from the 5:30 p.m. candlelight service; the posted recording is the same service as the YouTube "Christmas Eve 2022" livestream (linked at the start of the message). Scripture readings follow the ESV, which Wes was reading from in 2022; his second quotation of John 3:19–20 and his quotation of John 8:12 follow the CSB wording. This is not a publication-ready manuscript and it is not Wes's exact words for print. Check any line against the recording before it goes on a graphic, in an email, or in a book.*

Well, you guys have done a tremendous job singing tonight, and no worries—after just a little bit we'll sing a couple more songs. But I wanted to come up and share just a little thought before we sing a few more songs and light our Christ candle. I know during Christmas time everybody thinks about light. It's very easy to think about light during Christmas time because you got Christmas lights on everywhere and you can go drive around town and see all the lights that are on people's houses. And when you think of Christmas artwork, you get candle lights that are flickering and the whole idea of why we're gathered here tonight is because of a candlelight service.

And so the idea of Christmas and light very naturally go together. What's less common, I think, for most people to think of when it comes to Advent or Christmas is darkness. Because if you're going to think about light, you think about the opposite of darkness. You don't think about darkness at all. But if you really think about Advent, it really is about darkness. Because Advent is about longing. Advent is about the eager expectation. Advent is about what happens before the light comes. Which is darkness. Darkness is the absence of light, and so much of what we celebrate at Advent is the reality of darkness, and yet it's very common for people to kind of avoid it and not talk about it.

And it maybe even sounds a little bit atypical to be talking about it tonight. Let's be more sentimental, let's be a little more ceremonial and in the holiday spirit, but I really wonder if we can truly appreciate the light of Christ unless we first acknowledge that there is a darkness. And that Advent is about waiting for that light to get here. And as we wait, we're faced with the reality of darkness—the darkness without, in our culture and our world, and

the darkness within, in our own life. So we've got to look that darkness square in the face, acknowledge that it exists, so that we can open our eyes to see the light that overcomes the darkness.

And so to do that, I want us to meditate on a passage from John's Gospel in chapter 3. It's a very well-known passage. Many of you will have the first verse memorized. It's John 3:16. Does anybody know it by heart? I'm sure you do. "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, whosoever believes in him would not perish, but have eternal life." And then he continues that "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

He continues in verse 18, "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God." Verse 19 is our focus verse this evening: "And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God."

Charles Taylor is a Roman Catholic philosopher[1] and sociologist, and he came up—he coined this term that a lot of philosophers and sociologists use today. It's called the malaise of immanence. Has anybody ever heard that term before? If for nothing else, your benefit of coming to the Christmas Eve candlelight service is I can teach you about the malaise of immanence. And it's not "imminence" like we think of the imminent return of Jesus—he could come at any moment. The word immanence is with an A at the end, not an I. And it just means things are kind of self-contained.

It's a reference to the secularization of our world, that in our culture there is an absence of a belief in God. There is this conviction that the universe and the material world is all there is, all there was, all there ever will be, and that that conviction in our culture has robbed us of this belief in transcendence and the divine. And so what happens is in our culture you have these echoes, these things that are kind of pulling us towards transcendence, but underneath there's this conviction that there is no such transcendence, and there's this cognitive dissonance that takes place as a result where there's this restlessness in the human spirit, yearning for God, but deep down not really knowing how to find him, and that's called the malaise.

That's what he calls the malaise of immanence. And so if you've ever seen someone sitting out with a very depressed look on their face—what's he thinking about? He's thinking about the malaise of immanence. Or even like Christmas morning when your kids are going to maybe wake up in the morning, they're going to unwrap their Christmas gifts, and they're going to be super, super excited and hopefully they get everything that they want and then

the big hoo-rah happens and then after that big climactic moment for most children, I even remember this myself growing up.

There's this kind of longing for more. Has anybody else had that experience? Am I— Now, kids, if you have that longing, don't express it. Your mom and dad worked very hard to give you all the things that you wanted. But it's just being human. It's this—it's called the malaise of immanence. It's this yearning for more and we see it at times like these in our culture. We see it all over the place. This is why a lot of you adults, after your Christmas morning happens, you're going to get on your phones or your iPads and you're going to do what's called doomscrolling, where you just scroll through everyone else's pictures and everyone else's wonderful presents and think about how much better their life is than your life.

And you're thinking to yourself, there's got to be more. There's got to be something more. That's the malaise of immanence. It's this longing for the divine. And you know why I bring that question up? The reason I bring that issue up is because that's the context of John chapter 3. We sometimes quote John 3:16 and we lift it up out of its context. It's actually a discussion that Jesus is having with a teacher of teachers, a religious leader by the name of Nicodemus. And Nicodemus was a Pharisee, actually a pretty important Pharisee, a teacher of teachers in Israel, and he's suffering from the mala— a type of malaise of immanence.

He was obviously a Jew, so he believed that God existed, but he had that yearning there's got to be something more. And he saw the reality of Jesus Christ, his teachings, his working of miracles, these fantastic things that pointed to Jesus being unique and from God in some sense of the idea. And so he comes to Jesus asking the question, Is there something more? Is there something I'm missing? And man, would you have liked to be a fly on the wall in that conversation? We always talk about John 3:16, but before Jesus says that he talks to Nicodemus about being born again.

And Nicodemus just doesn't even have a category for what Jesus is talking about. He says, "How can a man go back into his mother's womb?" And to which Jesus says, You're a teacher of teachers and you don't get what I'm talking about. I'm not talking about going back into your mother's womb. I'm not talking about physical things whatsoever. You're— That's this kind of materialistic, godless universe that you have kind of sandwiched yourself into. I'm talking about new birth by the Spirit. And then he makes this statement in verse 19: "This is the judgment," Nicodemus.

This is the reality of the world you're living in. This is the reality of your heart and every other heart. "The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds were evil. And everyone who does evil hates the light and avoids it, so that his deeds may not be exposed." Fascinating insight from Jesus. It's what you call real talk from Jesus, right? This is the kind of talk that we don't always like to hear, but sometimes we need to hear. It's like going to a doctor and you've really got something

serious going on and maybe what you want him to hear—maybe what you want him to say—is go drink some greens and some protein shakes and you'll be fine but what you really need to hear is that you've got an aggressive form of cancer, and we've got to treat it with radiation.

It's going to be difficult. It's real talk. That's what Jesus is doing in a spiritual sense. The reality, Nicodemus, is that you love the darkness, and every other human being loves the darkness, and that's why they reject the light. Even if they say they like the light, even if they say they're pursuing God, the vision of God that they have in their mind is not the God of the Bible, it's not the true light, and it's not going to heal them. There is this phrase that gets thrown around: "We're all children of God."

I think if Jesus was addressing that statement in light of this context, he would say, No, we're not. We're not all children of God. We're all the creation of God. But as his creation, we've rejected him and we've decided to walk in the darkness, and the only way we can be made children of God is to receive the light. We have a problem, and the problem is darkness, and only the light of Christ can heal it. It's not a self-esteem problem, as much as therapy can help you. I actually wish everyone would get a therapist to make my job a whole lot easier.

But it's ultimately not a self-esteem problem as good as therapy can be, it's not a political problem. We make much ado about politics in this country and politics have their place and there are a lot of problems that politics can solve. The problem of darkness can't be solved with political solutions. It's not a social justice problem. You know, we can be pro-justice and advocate for those things, but you can get all the social justice in the world and there'd still be this reality of darkness. You can change the systems, you can turn them upside down, you can replace them with whatever your version of utopia is, it won't fix it.

Finally, it's not a personal liberty problem. There's one thing in America we've gotten down, or at least we used to have it down pretty good, is this idea of liberty. Let people choose, pursue the path that they want to pursue. And if you just remove the obstacles and let them pursue their path and express themselves to the fullest degree possible, then they'll be happy and we'll be happy. But as you can obviously see, that hasn't fixed the problem either. It's just deepened the reality of the darkness. We have a darkness problem and only the light can fix it.

Or to use biblical terminology, we have a sin problem. And only God's grace in Jesus Christ can fix it. We're dead in sin. We're ignorant to truth. We're blinded by Satan. Alienated from God, disobedient to his will, hostile to his commands, unloving towards him and ungrateful for his mercy. The Bible talks about us being enemies of God in our rebellion, children of his wrath, slaves to our sins and lovers of ourselves. We have wounds we cannot heal, and we have a shame we cannot remove, and we have a guilt we cannot forgive, and we have an enemy that we cannot defeat.

He said, "That feels too heavy, Wes. It's Christmas. I mean, lighten up." There is a darkness. And we need tough words from Jesus to remind us. Even on a day like today, when we want to be sentimental, there's a darkness. It's a darkness out there, and there's a darkness in here. There's a Tim Keller quote that I like, talking about sin, because we always sometimes think about sin as those bad things that we do. Jesus is getting underneath what sin really is. It's not just the actions. "When the Bible talks about sin, it's not just referring to the bad things we do, like lust or lying or whatever the case may be."

Sin—the heart of sin—"is ignoring God in the world he has made." He's the light. We reject the light, we ignore him, and we pursue the darkness. "It's rebelling against him by living without reference to him. It's saying, 'I will decide how I live my life.' And Jesus says that's our main problem." All idolatry is rooted in a refusal to acknowledge that God is God and we owe everything to him. Jesus says this is the verdict, Nicodemus. There's a darkness. And men love the darkness instead of the light. And you may want to protest and say, "Yeah, but I'm a good person," and "Yeah, I'm not as bad as the other guy," and Jesus would just cut it straight with you and say, If you chase your heart long enough, and if you pull that self-righteous thread long enough, and you get to the very center of what really drives and motivates you, you will find a rebellious voice that says, "Nobody has the right to tell me what to do.

I'll live the life I want to live." And that's the darkness. But thankfully, Jesus says the light has come. And notice how he describes himself as the light. He says in verse 16, "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever would believe in him wouldn't perish but have eternal life." He says in verse 17, which oftentimes doesn't get quoted, but it's just as important. He says, I didn't send my Son into the world to condemn the world. In other words, we're living in darkness, but it's not as if God is up there just angry about it and refusing to save us and just wants to rub our faces in it.

No, he sent Christ into the world to save us from the darkness, not to condemn us, but to rescue us. God's solution is salvation by grace through faith. And this is the thing that makes Christian Christmas Christian. It's the thing that makes Christianity different than any other religion in the world. I think all religions point to the darkness. But Christianity alone says the antidote to the darkness is not you introducing more darkness. It's not self-effort, it's not striving, it's not politics, it's not social justice, it's not all of these works-based salvations that we sometimes entertain.

The antidote to your darkness is a person and that person is Jesus. He is God who came to earth, took on flesh, lived a sinless perfect life, died on the cross as an atoning sacrifice for your sins, and three days later God raised him from the dead. And all that's required of you is to recognize the darkness within, repent of that darkness, and put your faith in Jesus

Christ as Lord. And you'll be saved. And the darkness will flee. And even in your own life you'll begin to recover and pursue God's original design and you will again walk in the light.

All you have to do is believe. Salvation by grace through faith. John chapter 8, verse 12, Jesus says, "I am the light of the world. Anyone who follows me will never walk in the darkness, but will have the light of life." Can you imagine it? No more striving, no more trying, no more bouncing from one thing to the next. No more walking around in darkness groping for light. The light of heaven has come down to you if you'll just turn and walk towards the light. And remember, as you walk towards the Lord Jesus Christ, he's not looking at you with a frown on his face and his arms crossed and saying, "You should have known better."

He didn't come to condemn. He came to save. And if you're here tonight and you've never turned and put your faith in Jesus as Lord, I want you to know you have a Father in heaven who loves you so much that he sent his Son into the world to rescue you. And all that's needed on your part is to repent of your sin and to put out your hand and say, "Jesus, would you save me?" And if there's never been a time in your life when you've done that, when we sing and we light these candles, there'll be an opportunity for you to come down.

While people are singing, I'm going to be right here on the front row and you can say, "I need to give my life to Jesus Christ tonight." Or come and find me after the end of the service. But the light has come, and all that's necessary for you to do is to turn from the darkness and walk towards the light. And if the Holy Spirit of God prompts you to do that, then don't leave this place without making that decision. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this passage which reminds us, unfortunately, that there is a darkness, and we ask for your forgiveness for glossing over it.

And the tendency of the human heart to press into self-righteousness and spiritual blindness is strong. So we thank you for these strong words from Jesus to penetrate that self-righteousness and spiritual arrogance and to remind us even good people walk in darkness. And even smart people don't have enough smarts to solve the problem of darkness. It's something that only Jesus can solve, because only Jesus can save. And so as we sing and as we light this Christ candle, and as we reflect on Christmas, the true reason for the season, we exalt the name of Jesus Christ.

We pray that you would remind us in a fresh and a new way that he is the only light who can penetrate the darkness, he is the only God who can save. And his prerequisite for receiving that salvation is a humble and contrite heart, and a hunger and thirst for righteousness that cannot come from within, but must come from God alone. And so help us to reach out for the light and to receive the salvation that's in Jesus' name. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

1. Transcript note: spoken as "a Roman Catholic theologian"; Charles Taylor (b. 1931) is a Canadian Catholic *philosopher*, professor emeritus of philosophy at McGill University, not a theologian. His account of the "malaises of immanence" is chapter 8 of *A Secular Age* (2007). Source: Wikipedia, "Charles Taylor (philosopher)"; *A Secular Age* ch. 8 notes (Calvin Seminar blog). ↩