

*100 Days in John, Pt. 4*  
***Lured Out of the Dark***

**First Presbyterian Church  
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Last week, we began looking at the story of Nicodemus, the leader and scholar who came to Jesus. They talked deep into the night. Nico wanted to know how to fit Jesus into his categories. Jesus daunted him completely by insisting that what Nico really needed he could not get or control on his own. He needed the

Spirit to make him new. To shine light into his mind and heart. Nico struggle to understand.

This is one of the few gospel stories where we don't get immediate resolution. Nico does not reject Jesus. But neither does he become a follower. There's no dramatic healing or conversion. We're left in suspense. In fact, it's not even clear when Jesus stops talking and John the gospel writer begins commenting. We don't see Nico go. The story just slips into commentary. And we are left to consider how we, as the readers, will respond. And that leads us to an unsettling place.

Sooner or later it comes down to this: life is not working out for me on my own. I thought I could figure it out. I thought I was self-sufficient. I thought the way I had arranged things was enough. But there are symptoms that tell me otherwise.

- I feel lonely inside. Ordinary relationships are not filling the void.
- The relationships I have don't feel right. There's a lot of friction, a history of damage, old mess that keeps surfacing in the present.
- I get feelings of hopelessness. I feel how fast time is passing. I feel my body getting older. I worry that there is nothing more, that I'm just going to go into emptiness.

- I'm not sure I have done what I'm supposed to have done with my life. I'm not even sure what I'm supposed to do with the rest of my life.
- I have regrets and I don't know how to forgive myself for things I have done. I have a floating sense of guilt. I have a background noise of dread inside me.
- I feel like I'm in a fog and I just can't get clear.

Life is not working out for me on my own. I wonder if I could turn to God. But how do I do that? I used to think I knew God. But we drifted apart. Or what I had just wasn't enough. It seemed made up. It has always felt to me like God and I are sort of at odds. How can I know God better?

All Nico had to do was ask for the mysterious Spirit to birth him anew. But he just could not take it all in. The cost was so high! Everything he had built his life upon seemed to be sinking. He had dedicated his life to preserve the faith of his people. He had done everything he could to keep them faithful to the LORD. Now he heard that it's all totally beyond his power.

We may well resonate with his feelings:

- I've always tried to do the right thing and now I hear it can *never* be enough.
- I've been told that spirituality arises from personal and private beliefs. People have their own ideas about God. We pursue our beliefs as we see fit. Now I hear that God is this way and not another way. It's *not* up to me.
- I thought I was the choice-maker. Isn't my life my own and my purpose to fulfill *my* dreams? Don't I have power to make decisions and even to create my own meaning? Now I am startled to hear that I am *not* in control and never was. I *cannot* make life work out for me on my own. God has to do something.

With Nicodemus we may well wonder, *How can these things be!?*

This is the context for famous John 3: 16 passage. These may be words of Jesus, or they may be part of the Gospel's commentary on this encounter. Either way, we're taken straight to the heart of God. *God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*

This is the news we need to hear. We can't make it up, demand it or deserve it. Jesus came to make something known that we need God's help in order to believe. God loved the world in this way. He *gave*. He gave his unique Son Jesus to a broken and rebellious world. Just because he loves us. He wants to solve our lives for us, by giving his life to us.

This gets worked out in a pair of seeming opposites we have to hold together. Such salvation is *God's work*, prompted by nothing we could say or do, only by his initiating love. Only God could send his Son to be one of us, and to live and die for all of us. Only God's Spirit alone can open our eyes to see the truth of Christ. But at the very same time, *we* are summoned to believe into Jesus. We have a choice. *We faith into* Jesus. We are entrust ourselves to him.

Or not. We may choose to reject the work of God in Jesus. One of my favorite Bible commentators, Lesslie Newbigin wrote, "The purpose of his coming is to bring life, not death. Yet the gift of life must be accepted and can be refused," (Newbigin, *The Light Has Come*, p. 43).

And sadly, when Jesus walked the earth, many, many declined him. The light shined in their darkness and they turned away because they preferred the dark. Our passage says it this way. "The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed" (3: 19-20).

Nobody sleeping soundly in the dark likes when the lights blare on. Sleepover friends poke you to open your eyes into a burning flashlight. Or, it could be you've finally fallen asleep on an international flight, then all the lights come on so they can serve you a yogurt. Dead tired from boot camp, the drill sergeant shocks you with blaring light and a shout. When we're curled up in the dark, we recoil from too much light.

This can happen even when the dark is killing us. Maybe you know what it is to be in an argument with someone you're close to. You actually know you are wrong. But you don't want to admit it. It could have been over hours, days, ago if you'd just said sorry. But instead, you defended yourself. You got mad and stayed mad. You retreated into your world of dark illusion, building an airtight, righteous case against someone. With every passing minute, coming back into the light of truth and humility gets harder. You're ashamed. You're proud. You're scared. You stay in dark misery and hate the light.

Maybe you know what it is to go on a days-long bender. You're coming down from that high, and you feel awful. You're so tired. But there are so many people to face. Consequences at home, school and work. Coming into the light means owning up to all you missed, said and did. So you consume some more, retreating into the night of isolation.

Maybe you know it just from spiritual drift. You skipped your prayers. One day turned into a week. Now you're not sure you even want to pray. Your ears are closing to God. And even though you're the one who moved, you blame God for turning away. You're miserable disconnected from your Creator and Savior. But too ashamed, too stubborn, too numb to be drawn into the light.

I remember when a woman described her journey through depression. She used all the means available from therapy to psychiatry to exercise to prayer. It took a long time. I asked her, "When did the turn come?" She thought for a while and then replied, "When I finally started to believe it might be worth it to move toward the light. When I was ready to risk losing the momentary comfort of the darkness that was killing me, for the immediate discomfort of the light that might give me life."

We don't go willingly into the light. Only reluctantly do we give up solving our own lives on our own terms. For our Lent book this year, I wrote a prayer that reflects my own experience of loving the dark and hating the light:

I love the darkness  
Because it whispers my thoughts are private.  
No one need know  
The revenge I plot, the resentments I nurse,  
The lusts I entertain, the greed I fuel,  
The sovereignty I celebrate, the adulation I imagine,  
The pleasures I plan, the judgements I pronounce, or  
The inordinate amount of time I spend  
Designing my own comfort and diversion.

I resist a light that would illuminate  
Those cherished shadows.  
I guard my dark fortress fiercely.  
For what would happen to me if these  
Were known? Or worse, swept away?

Yet inside my head and heart  
All these thoughts foment disorder  
And ferment a warring chaos.  
They leave me isolated, hungry, impoverished.

Distantly, I see your light shining.  
It's on a far horizon of my night.  
Could I steal away from *me*,  
Just get out of the town of self  
And run toward you, Lord Jesus?

I'd arrive penniless and sick,  
Naked except for this coat of shame,  
And see if this light incinerates me  
Or shines me into life and love anew.

It's always a risk. A risk that we will lose ourselves. Be destroyed. Be imprisoned. Be constricted and suffocated if we get up and love towards the light that is shining. The offer is so inclusive: God so loved the world. The world that is angry at God, hostile towards him, the world that set itself to be an enemy to God and even killed his Son. Yet God loves. Yet God gave his best beloved. Knowing all, he sent his Son to save the world. So inclusive. Yet so exclusive. There's no removing the offense of this. God showed himself to be this way. To be Jesus. To be the man from Nazareth who loved us so utterly it killed him. To be the man who though he died, he rose from the dead never to die again. This one, this Jesus is Lord and Savior. He is for everyone. Yet there is no other. And he calls you out of the darkness even now.

That whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. I love the meaning that opens up when you look at the original language. John uses words that mean more literally, "believing *into* him." It's the sense of going from one place to another. Moving out of self and into Jesus. Trusting him, not just once, but in a continuing, moment by moment way. I'm called to be *faithing* into Christ all the time. Swimming for the light. Shedding the shackles of the dark and straining toward Christ with all my being. This is the basic spiritual movement for our whole lives. It's never one and done. The point is a relationship. Every hour we are to give as much as we know of ourselves to as much as we know of Christ. And we are always learning more about both. There's always more dark to leave. There's always more light to receive. There's always more sin to admit. There's

always more grace to cancel that sin. There are always more habits to break, wounds to offer, shame to shed. And there is always, always more room in his wounds for ours. There is always a wider reach of his crucified arms.

We've drunk a lot of darkness in our days. But it's not too late. Never too late as long as you are here in this present moment. The dungeon flares with light. The cell doors are open. The death sentence has been commuted. A land of everlasting light and life awaits. Will you arise and follow Jesus this very hour? With whatever he is showing you of yourself, will you take it out of the dark and into the light. In repentance and faith. Trusting, risky, the truth: God so loved the world, that he gave.