

***Light of the World***  
***The Rev. Christi O. Brown***  
***FPC Traditional Services***  
***March 11, 2018***

John 3:14-21

*Throughout the year of 2018, we are exploring the life of Christ during our year-long sermon series. Last week we focused on the passage from John where Jesus cleansed the temple, which immediately precedes our passage for today. The Gospel of John is the only Gospel in which Nicodemus is mentioned. He is a Pharisee who takes a keen interest in Jesus. Nicodemus appears three times in John, with this being his first appearance.*

*In this passage, he comes to see Jesus at night in an attempt to better understand his teachings. For the first ten verses of this chapter, Jesus and Nicodemus engage in a private dialogue. But then Jesus begins using the plural form of you, indicating he was addressing more people at this point. Hear now the word of God:*

[Jesus said...]<sup>14</sup>”And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,<sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.<sup>16</sup> 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.

<sup>17</sup>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.<sup>18</sup> 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.”

<sup>19</sup>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. <sup>20</sup>For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. <sup>21</sup>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.”

*This is the Word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God.***

*Let us pray:*

God of Love, you are the light of the world. Illumine our hearts and minds with your light, revealing yourself to us, that we might hear your word for our lives today. In your most holy and gracious name we pray, Amen.

## Sermon

Country music star Keith Urban had a hit song a few years back in which he sang, “I learned everything I needed to know from John Cougar, John Deere, and John 3:16.” I’m not sure about the other Johns he lists, but for many Christians, the message of John 3:16 is one of the most important things they’ve learned in their lives.

It’s also probably the most well-known verse in the entire Bible, likely because it practically sums up the Christian faith in one sentence. It announces the why of Jesus’ life and death. And although this is not the verse that I’m specifically focusing on today, there’s no way to read this passage and simply gloss over it. For some of you, it is your favorite verse in the Bible, maybe even the first one you ever memorized. For others, it feels so overused in society that it’s now become cliché and doesn’t carry much meaning for you. And some of you even cringe slightly when hearing it because you’ve often heard it misused. Regardless of which way you might feel, everyone knows it well. And look how much theology is packed into this one verse: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, so that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.”

As comprehensive as this verse is, as we all know, no verse stands entirely alone, but is supported by the context around it. This is why we *can’t* simply pare our faith down to one verse. This is why we have the entire Bible as our faith guide. And so today we’ll look at this passage in its entirety.

Several words are mentioned multiple times throughout this short passage, indicating Jesus had some clear points to get across to Nicodemus, to the people gathered at night around him, and to us today. In the first five verses of this passage, he repeatedly mentions the Son, referring to himself as both Son of Man and Son of God.

He also mentions the world several times in very endearing terms. God so loved the world. The Son was not sent to condemn the world, but to save it.

But by far, the word Jesus mentions most frequently in the first part of this passage is “believe.” He repeatedly says that those who believe may have eternal life. Those who believe will not perish and will not be condemned. Believe means “to have faith in, to put trust in, to think that something is true.” Jesus is saying that those who believe in me, those who trust in me, those who know me to be true, it is those who will be saved through me and have eternal life. Many Biblical commentators believe that when Jesus talked about eternal life, he was not simply talking about everlasting life in heaven, but life lived fully in the presence of God right here and now. A quality life full of belief in Christ. A life full of light.

And that’s where the second part of this passage picks up. In the last three verses, Jesus shifts his focus to light and darkness. How the light has come into the world, but how people love darkness more than light. Jesus clearly pits the light against the darkness in a dualistic sense. To be clear, the Bible does not always shun darkness. In fact, several years ago, many of you, as did I, walked next door to *The Advent* to hear Barbara Brown Taylor talk about her book *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, which wonderfully explores the positive aspects of darkness found in the Bible. But in our passage for today, Jesus is clearly using darkness to symbolize the evil of the world. And he emphasizes that he is the light that has come into the world in order to overcome the darkness. These words sound familiar because they harken back to the very first words of the Gospel of John:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup>All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being <sup>4</sup>in him was life,<sup>l</sup> and the life

was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness shall not overcome it. (John 1:1-5)

And hence, all of this together—John’s opening proclamation about Jesus as the light, Jesus’ response to the questions of Nicodemus, and Jesus’ proclamation of being the light—all point to our focus of today that Jesus is the Light of the World. A light that has been here since the beginning, a light that is here now, and a light that will shine forever more. Indicating that no matter where or when or how we find ourselves in the darkness of the world, Jesus is our light.

As mentioned in the children’s sermon, this is why we light the Christ candle. The candle is a symbol to remind us who is the center of worship and the center of our lives. It reminds us that no matter how dim or dark our lives may be at times, that the light of Christ always shines brightly. The original root word used for light in this passage is *phos* (p-h-o-s), the same root as our modern day word phosphorus, which is a substance that shines and glows in the dark. Jesus is the true light that shines with spectacular, divine brilliance into the world’s darkness.

If you’ve ever tried to walk around at night without a light source, you are well aware of the dangers of the dark. Even mundane pieces of furniture become seemingly combative objects lurking in the night. Many a person walking in the dark has painfully stubbed a toe, bruised a shin, been clocked in the face, or even broken a bone. It’s painful just thinking about those injuries.

And it’s not that different in our lives. If we try to walk through a time of darkness in our lives without the light of the world, then we often stumble and fall as well. Without a doubt, there are going to be times of darkness in our lives. I do not know one adult who hasn’t faced multiple dark days. Some are minor, some are major.

Some are short, some seem never-ending. Some are physical, some are spiritual. All encounter the unknown and are scary to some degree. All require faith and strength and hope and love. All of these experiences are made a little easier if we carry the light of the world with us to light our path. Sometimes we're strong enough to carry it on our own. Sometimes we need a friend to carry it for us.

I've begun listening to books on my phone lately. I'll scan the online audio book collection of the county library and checkout and download books from there. I particularly love listening to people's stories—memoirs, biographies and autobiographies. As I was browsing this category lately, I came across an autobiography by Steven Curtis Chapman, a popular and prolific Christian singer-songwriter, who's been around for decades and published over 20 albums. I was familiar with his name and a few of his songs, but didn't know many particulars about him. I decided to check out his book and listen to it.

And though it was a bit long, I really enjoyed his book. He was so honest and real about everything, from his doubts around his career to his struggles in his marriage. He was also extremely faithful to God throughout everything he faced. Near the end of the book, he recalled the hardest time in his life. The time his world turned as black as night. That fateful day in 2008 when his 19-year old biological son accidentally ran over and killed his adopted 5-year old daughter in their driveway. He covered heart-wrenching details of that dark day and the darkness that followed. To help endure the pain, he turned to what he knew best—writing songs. He produced an entire album of songs from this experience called *Beauty Will Rise*. Here is an excerpt from some lyrics from the title track:

So take another breath for now  
And let the tears come washing down

And if you can't believe  
I will believe for you

'Cause I have seen the signs of spring  
Just watch and see  
Out of the ashes,  
Beauty will rise  
And we will dance among the ruins  
We will see it with our own eyes

Out of this darkness  
New life will shine<sup>1</sup>

These lyrics speak for themselves, but somehow in the midst of all the pain and the darkness, Steven and his family were able to see the light. Steven was not sure he could ever sing and perform concerts again, especially the songs from this painstaking album. But by the grace of God he did. Out of the brokenness, beauty did indeed rise. Steven and his family went on to share their story with others with the hope that their story might be able to help others who have faced similar dark days. Steven and his sons, including the one who ran over his sister, tell this story and their faith journey from the stage on their many concert tours. Steven's wife wrote a book called *Choosing to SEE: A Journey of Struggle and Hope*. Their story has positively impacted millions of people around the world. As a faithful family, they chose to believe and to see the light of Christ even in the darkest of days, even when others had to hold that light for them.

Our Scripture for today are words to hold onto during dark times. At the bedside of someone dying, or in the midst of cancer treatments, or on the road of divorce. Words to comfort us when we wonder if faith is worth it, why our faith doesn't keep us safe,

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Curtis Chapman. "Beauty Will Rise," 2009.

<https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/stevencurtischapman/beautywillrise.html>

or why this human life hurts so much. For God *so loved* the world. “Loved” means take pleasure in. God takes pleasure in this world, my friends. In you and in me, just as we are. Saved means to be healed, cured, restored, rescued from danger. A life lived in the light is a healed and whole life in harmony with divine truth.

I mentioned earlier how Jesus used the word *believe* a lot in this passage. It turns out that the verb believe appears more frequently in the Gospel of John than in any other New Testament writing. Given that verbs imply action, John overall, and Jesus specifically in this passage, places a strong emphasis on the dynamic aspects of believing. Here, belief and good deeds are closely bound together.<sup>2</sup> Jesus is clearly calling us to put our faith into action. And this Lenten season is the perfect time to ponder our own paths of action. The Light of the World not only assures us that he is always there to light our way, but essentially says, “I have given you this light to illumine your way. Now go share it with others.”

One of my greatest pleasures of being a pastor is looking out over the congregation at our Christmas Eve candlelight service. To see how one light beginning with the Christ candle can light up the entire sanctuary is just amazing. And as I look out, I see so many faces I know. People who are part of this congregation, this community. And as your pastors, we know your stories. And we see you hold your candles up during the last verse of *Joy to the World*. And we know what you’ve been through in your lives in the past year, from the mundane to the hardships to the celebrations. And without exception, those who have been through the darkest times, the hardest trials of their lives, they are the ones who hold their candles up the highest. And I tear

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<sup>2</sup> Jouette M. Bassler, “John 3: 14-21, Exegetical Perspective.” *Feasting on the Word, Year B*. pp. 119, 121



up every year as I look out over an entire family of faith bathed in the light of Christ, with each person sharing their light. Because that, that is what church is all about. That is what faith is about. That is what Christ lighting up the world is about. And there is no way we can keep that to ourselves.

And so on this first day of daylight savings time, when the light of day begins to stretch out longer, it seems like the perfect day to refocus on walking in light. In fact, I remember some running friends years ago calling daylight savings time “Runners’ Delight.” So go, my friends. Whether you walk or run, go share the Light of the World with the whole world. Because one candle can make all the difference.

*All praise, honor, and glory be to God our Creator, Redeemer & Sustainer, Amen.*