

“WELCOMING THE GOD-LIGHT”

John 3:14-21

Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 14, 2021

Jesus had a conversation with Nicodemus, one of the Pharisees. In this conversation, the two discussed how it was that people could have a personal relationship with God other than through religious professionals. Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church:

[Jesus answered Nicodemus]

“No one has ever gone up into the presence of God except the One who came down from that Presence, the Son of Man. In the same way that Moses lifted the serpent in the desert so people could have something to see and then believe, it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up—and everyone who looks up to him, trusting and expectant, will gain a real life, eternal life.

“This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn’t go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again. Anyone who trusts in him is acquitted; anyone who refuses to trust him has long since been under the death sentence without knowing it. And why? Because of that person’s failure to believe in the one-of-a-kind Son of God when introduced to him.

“This is the crisis we’re in: God-light streamed into the world, but men and women everywhere ran for the darkness. They went for the darkness because they were not really interested in pleasing God. Everyone who makes a practice of doing evil, addicted to denial and illusion, hates God-light and won’t come near it, fearing a painful exposure. But anyone working and living in truth and reality welcomes God-light so the work can be seen for the God-work it is.”

Here ends the reading. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

One year ago, on this very Sunday, UCC Parker Hilltop moved online for worship. The CDC, Governor Polis, and the Rocky Mountain Conference all advised us to close the doors of the church to in-person activities and services. That first Sunday felt kind of like a snow day; I remember scrambling to send the word out to everyone and invite them to Zoom where we could still gather. Though it wouldn't be the same as being there in person, we felt sure we could continue on for a short time as though this was a minor and short-lived bump in the road.

Hah!

First, we learned that not everyone could get online, internet service being what it was and home electronic systems being what they were.

Next, we learned that it is not possible on Zoom with any quality to sing live or play music or speak all at the same time. This meant our liturgical style would not work. We could not effectively do Call and Response-type liturgy, we couldn't all sing the Doxology or any of the hymns. We couldn't perform musical pieces live like we could in the church sanctuary. The transmission delay makes it impossible.

We did not have adequate recording devices, so our early attempts to record music did not turn out so well. You all were so gracious and we all on the Worship Team were so frustrated.

I knew *some* Power Point and *some* Zoom, so I made the best of both systems and little by little, and with Shellie Luallin's help, most of the church was able to tune in on Sundays. Julie, Sue and Peggy did their level best to produce music that could be broadcasted, and just in the nick of time, Rosanne French stepped in to help me with Power Point.

But that first few weeks...

Not much God-light came in through the windows of my home office, the new temporary “church sanctuary.” On March 15, 2020, I preached about John’s Gospel story of the woman at the well who has been discounted, but who expects respect from Jesus. Here we are a year later and guess what? The virus was initially discounted as another strain of an easily managed flu bug, but it now expects our respect. More than 500,000 people in this country and two-and-a-half million worldwide, plus their families and friends and all the medical service people who attended them found this out in the most stark and cruel way as they died from COVID-19. Millions more will live with the effects of infection for a long time, perhaps their whole lives. This virus expects respect. God does not-or maybe cannot-- stop its progression. Humankind must do so through the application of God-given inspiration, science, and determination.

A year later, many of you are vaccinated and you are understandably chomping at the bit to resume your normal social lives. There will be a mass temporary exodus from church in the coming months as you pack up RVs, SUVs, suitcases, and food chests and take to the road to see your families that you have missed so much. It is understandable. You will be missed.

In the meantime, church leaders you trust will be working on our future possibilities for worship and in-person reconnection. It is an exciting time in our lives, a breath of fresh air for many who have been cooped up for so long. We have had it relatively easy here in our neck of the woods, but much of the country has suffered-and continues to suffer—so, so much. People are still without water in Texas. People are under water in Kentucky. The number of people needing unemployment compensation continues to climb along with

the number of people who are homeless or living with family members, in cars, and at campsites.

Yes, this year's damage expects respect.

Gospel-writer John is an evangelist. He makes no bones about the fact that he wants the small Christus community of Ephesus to grow. His time is around the year 100, when the past century persecutions of Jews and early People of the Way are but a memory. The people of John's context enjoy relative religious freedom; they have many choices for where to invest their time, talent and treasure. John is quite clear how to go about growing God's garden and reclaiming the mutuality of relationship with the Creator. It starts with the center Tree of Life—Jesus resurrected. It was meant as an invitation, but John's discourse on oneness with Jesus and the Creator has been, as Rob Bell puts it, "hijacked by a number of other stories, stories Jesus isn't interested in telling, because they have nothing to do with what Jesus came to do."

These words of John 3 have become words of division within Christendom, a herald for a sure-fire way to attain everlasting life. This understanding is a complete bastardization of their meaning-in-context; John 3 has nothing to do with salvation upon death from what is preached by some as God's damning judgment of the unsaved, and everything to do with recreating the Eden relationship that God intends between God and Creation, not *then*, but *here and now*.

Hear the words of Alexander John Shaia about this passage, the conversation between the Pharisee Nicodemus and Jesus:

At their most innocent levels of misuse, these three verses have been at the forefront of rejection and self-righteous condescension. At their worst, they have been the justification for so-called "holy" wars and the

slaughter of Jews, Muslims, indigenous peoples and other non-Christians.

Yet the entire story of Nicodemus is about *overturning* narrow vision and tribalism, and John's consistent use of the word, "world" as a place of immature understanding confirms this. Therefore, we read in John's words that God cares so much about trying to remedy our being stuck and unaware that [God] continually sends Jesus the Christ to help us be more open and mature. [God's] promise is that if by The Christ we can transcend our limitations, we can rejoin God in timeless eternal life.

Therefore, it is the greatest tragedy that these particular words have been so misused—when their specific intention was precisely the opposite.

Bringing this conundrum into our post-modern experience, Rob Bell tells this story of how John 3 is used as a weapon, not the balm it was intended to be:

...there are those whose lessons about heaven consist primarily of who *will* be there and who *won't* be there. And so there's a woman sitting in a church service with tears streaming down her face, as she imagines being reunited with her [Christian] sister who was killed in a car accident seventeen years ago. The woman sitting next to her, however, is realizing that if what their pastor is saying about heaven is true, she will be separated from her mother and father, brothers and sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, and friends forever, with no chance of reunion, ever. She in that very same moment has tears streaming down her face, too, but they are tears of a very different kind.

When she asks the pastor afterward if it's true that, because they aren't Christians none of her family will be [in heaven with her], she's told she'll be having so much fun worshipping God that it won't matter to her. Which is quite troubling, and confusing, because the people she loves the most in the world *do* matter to her. (*Love Wins*, 25)

This story illustrates how terribly important it is that we Christians reclaim the garden metaphor for our religion, the imagery that invites wild and diverse growth, flora and fauna and human life of every kind and persuasion.

We must support an imagery of life that causes us to reach up, up ever up towards the healing and warming rays of the sun, where God lives and swirls and informs our lives with our every breath.

This is the God-light that protects us from falling into the idolatry of ego, thinking God's love is reserved only for those who pledge allegiance to a personal and exclusive relationship with Jesus. This is the God-light that keeps us firmly rooted in the present where we can affect loving change in God's name rather than in the romanticized vision of the future afterlife where small-minded Christians are more than happy to butt in line and kick others to the curb.

Just like there is no going back after the pandemic, but only forward, Christendom needs to get its act together and begin promoting the garden instead of the trash heap. Protestant televangelists who are labeling the vaccine created by Johnson and Johnson "the satanic mark of the beast" are causing real harm at a time when we can least afford it. Says theology professor Dr. Lisa Fullam, "This kind of moral scare-mongering can cost lives."

I am telling you as your pastor: Get vaccinated. Take the first available product of the Big 3 offered you—Pfizer, Moderna, or J&J; they are our best chance to save lives and support the common good.

"As Christians, we follow a healer who taught us to love our neighbors. That means rejecting anti-vaccine rhetoric and getting shots into as many arms as possible as fast as possible." (Faithful America, 3/6/2021)

Our world has changed so in the past year. There is much to celebrate and many to mourn. There is much work to be done and many reasons to pray and discern the Spirit's direction for us as Christians, as a church, and in our individual lives. There are many reasons to get out on the road this Spring, but

there are just as many ways to stay connected here, with others in your church family. We will be here online, week in and week out, faithfully and gratefully sharing the unconditional love of God as broadly as we can. Gratitude and grace go hand in hand as we seek the God-light and we recommit to restore our Eden relationship with our Creator and with the rest of the Creation.

May It Be So.

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