

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**John 3:14-21, “Bright Light for Dark Days”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 3/10/2024**

I remember driving with my parents at night when I was really young.

The darkness was so unusual to me because I had an early bed time –  
when the darkness came, then I went to bed.

But sometimes, on special nights, we would be out at the Pohler’s house for dinner.

And because the dinner would go late, I would get bored  
of the adult conversation and I would get to play flight simulator  
on the computer, because that was the only game that they had.

Eventually, they would wrap up and my dad would start the car  
to warm it up a little. And when we walked out to the car,

I looked at the headlights on our Oldsmobile Cutlass Sierra.  
They weren’t too far below my head height,  
so I could really see how intensely bright they were.

So bright that it hurt my eyes to look right into them.

I could feel the heat that emanated from them in the cold night air.  
“Why did they need to be so bright?” I wondered.

Then we had a long drive home because we lived out in the country.

And I would sit on the corduroy seats in the back  
and look out the windshield and with the patchy fog.  
I could see the beams of those powerful headlamps shining ahead,  
pointing the way forward.

Then, worried about deer and ditches and other vehicles  
speeding by so fast, I was very glad for those bright lights  
that exposed everything ahead of us.

John chapter 3 are like the headlights of the gospel.

They are bright lights for dark days, serving a particular purpose:  
to reveal the lay of the land with stark contrast.

In the verses we read today we encounter absolute categories  
that present a very binary perspective on life:  
there's the light and there's the dark.

You're either in the light or you're not in the light.  
And accordingly, you either have hope of eternal life with God or you don't.

Such bright lights can be hard to look at.  
They don't create a pleasant atmosphere.

So I want to say out front: There are times when we need more nuance.  
There are difficult situations that require us to see the shades of gray.  
Think about your own spiritual journey with all of its twists and turns,  
times of clarity, times of confusion.  
There are times when we need a more gentle light that can  
make special considerations  
and account for the uniqueness of our particular story.

But this passage is not for those times.

This passage is for dark days.  
It's for moments when you don't know if you're going to make it at all.  
It's for the times when it seems like everyone  
has conspired against you.  
It's for when you are sure that you cannot make it on your own efforts.

When the world is a long dark night full of pain and despair,  
you need a powerful light  
to cut through it all and show you the way home.  
That's John 3.

If we take these verses for what they are,  
then we won't get caught up on what they're not.

In the passage that we read today, there are four bright lights that shine out:

- 1) Light of belief: Everyone who believes in Jesus has eternal life
- 2) Light of intention: God's intention is to save, not to condemn
- 3) Light of authenticity: Whoever believes stands in the light and is not condemned.
- 4) Light of absence: Whoever does not believe hides their deeds in the darkness and is already condemned.

**The light of belief shines out from the end of Jesus' conversation with a leading Pharisee named Nicodemus.**

Nicodemus wanted to know who Jesus was because he could see that Jesus was doing things that could only be done with God's help.

Jesus uses an illustration from the life of Moses:

There was a dark day when poisonous snakes were plaguing the people of Israel.

So Moses lifted up a bronze snake and everyone who looked to it in faith that God would save them, would be saved.

In the same way, Jesus tells Nicodemus,

The Son of Man will be lifted up and all who believe in him will have eternal life.

Don't get distracted by the snakes, okay. I know it's weird, but just don't.

All you need to know is that they were dangerous and the people needed to be saved.

Jesus is saying that Israel is once again in danger, and they will once again need to trust when God's symbol of salvation is raised up.

But this time it will be the Son of Man who is raised up. Son of Man was Jesus' favorite title for himself.

It comes from Daniel 7, where Daniel has a vision  
of a heavenly figure described as “one like a son of man.”  
This figure approaches God, the Ancient of Days and is given authority,  
glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples  
of every language worshiped him. That is someone to believe in!

Then comes the bright light: In v. 15,  
Jesus says that when the Son of Man is raised up  
(which we know means “raised up on the cross”)  
all who believe may have eternal life *in him*.

My translation suggests that vs. 16-21 are not in Jesus’ own voice  
but are commentary from John the gospel writer to expand  
on what Jesus has just been saying to Nicodemus.

And so John 3:16 repeats exactly what we heard from Jesus in John 3:15.  
These verse are immensely clarifying for us because they cut through  
the fog of legalism, perfectionism, and religious dogma:  
There is no theology test for eternal life.

There is no behavior test for eternal life.  
It all comes down to seeing the work of Jesus and having *faith*.  
Believing here is not just intellectual ascent to a doctrine. It’s not arm’s length.  
This belief is trusting Jesus—who died a shameful death—with  
the whole content of your life.

Everyone who sees what Christ has done and believes has eternal life *in him*.

**The second light is that God’s intention is to save, not to condemn.**

Whatever we might read about judgement and punishment  
and consequences in Scripture, it all must be related  
to God’s basic intention in John 3:17:  
**“God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world  
but so save the world through him.”**

This cuts through the fog of motivation. Does God want to get revenge for sin?  
Is God trying to exert control over what I do?  
Has God set a trap to see who will fall into it?  
No. God's purpose is not to condemn but to save.

**The third and fourth lights go together.** They are corollaries of one another,  
flip sides of the same coin: authenticity and absence.

Together these cut through the fog of control:

Do I chart my own destiny? Do I make my own luck?  
Or do I trust in God who created me, loves me,  
and became like me in Jesus Christ?

The light of authenticity reveals those who stand in the light ...  
and are not condemned.

Why are they not condemned? Because they've worked hard  
and prayed hard and served others and did the best they could? NO!  
V. 21 says that those who live by the truth come into the light  
*so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done  
has been done in the sight of God.*

That is why I call it the light of authenticity.

When we stand in this light we are admitting before God and everyone  
that we can't do it on our own. This is *confession of our true selves*.

The light of authenticity reveals that we are not up to the task  
of forging our own destiny, we are desperately in need of God.

Which means that the most surprising thing about this light  
is that for all it reveals,  
those who stand in it...are not condemned!

This is proof of God's intention to save.

The last light is the light of absence.

It's really the same light as the light of authenticity,  
except that there's nobody standing in it.

The light of absence is a spotlight on an empty stage.

Instead of saying, "I can't do it on my own," when we hide from the light  
and refuse to confess,  
we resolutely commit ourselves to the anthem made famous  
by Frank Sinatra, "I did it my way."

The function of claiming full control of our lives is to hide  
our inadequacies and failures from God and say,  
"It's none of your business what I do or don't do.  
This is my life to live."

As my mentor Dave Rohrer says, you cannot believe that Jesus  
is the one in whom all things cohere  
and at the same time believe that your life is entirely your own.  
The light of absence is light that we hide from.  
Which means it only remains the light of absence until we  
admit that it's time to step out from the shadows into authenticity.

So it is with good reason that John says,  
"Whoever does not believe hides their deeds in the darkness  
and is already condemned."  
I have lived there before. Sometimes I still go to visit on dark days.  
It's a lonely, fearful place. But when my pride is strong enough  
I'll stick around there for a while.  
I'm so incredibly grateful that the voice of Jesus always calls me back.

One last note about this bright light for our darkest days: Jesus *is* the light.  
V. 19: "Light has come into the world."

When we look upon Jesus and recognize our need for such indescribable love,  
when we stop holding onto control for dear life,  
we see Jesus the Light of Belief in whom is eternal life,  
Jesus the Light of God's intention to save,  
Jesus the Light of Authenticity in whom we can be our true selves,  
Jesus the Light of the World.