

# Light and Darkness, Choice and Drift

1 John 1:5-2:2; John 3:9-21

This morning, we return one last time to the darkened doorway where a rabbi from old Israel, Nicodemus, appeared late one night to whisper to Jesus that he and many of his powerful friends knew that Jesus was something special, thought that Jesus was sent by God and that they could work with him if he were interested. But we saw that Jesus wasn't the slightest bit interested in any alliance with any of the powers that be. Instead, Jesus spoke heart to heart with Nicodemus about things that old Israel couldn't see, so intent were they on themselves and their own national destiny.

*"Truly, truly I say to you,"* Jesus said, *"unless one is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God."* The point being that building God's kingdom is not a matter of reforming ourselves or reforming society to some high flung ideal, but rather God's kingdom happens when we look to heaven for guidance from God and power from God to start our lives over with his Spirit ruling in our hearts.

And Nicodemus was not clueless as to how difficult starting over would be for a man of his age and his stature. *"How can a man be born when he is old?"* he asked Jesus, well aware of how settled and certain people become once they've found a way of life that works for them. But Jesus kept after him, solemnly testifying a second time, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and of Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."* He went on to picture people as some-thing like branches on a tree, bending and turning this way and that, moved by the power of an invisible wind.

Nicodemus, who had labored his whole life to manage his soul and manage his circumstances, could only marvel at the notion of God's Spirit blowing us this way and that. The old rabbi threw up his hands and asked, *"How can these things be?"* Now it was Jesus' turn to marvel that *"a teacher of Israel"* didn't *"know"* that only God's Spirit could open his kingdom to flesh and blood creatures like us. So Jesus makes his third solemn declaration in 14 verses: *"Truly, truly I say to you, we speak what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but you [people] do not receive our testimony."*

Note that both Nicodemus and Jesus have used the pronoun *"we"* in their conversation, I think, because each of them is speaking for his own community. Nicodemus spoke for old Israel, trying to digest this new teacher God has sent their way. Remember he said, *"...we know that you are a teacher sent from God..."*. And Jesus speaks for himself and his disciples, the new Israel God has begun to call as his own. And he continues with what is an ominous warning: *"If I speak to you of earthly things and you do not believe, how shall you believe if I speak to you of heavenly things?"*

And here Jesus winds into the heart of his gospel for Nicodemus. Being *"born from above...born of Spirit"* means not only that Nicodemus needs a change of heart, but more that Nicodemus and old Israel with him need to take to heart who it is that God has sent their way. So Jesus warns the old rabbi, *"... no one has ascended into heaven but he who has descended from heaven, even the Son of Man."*

Jesus has repeatedly, solemnly asserted to Nicodemus that he must *"be born from above...be born of water and Spirit"*. The old man needs to start over, needs to open his heart to the Spirit and bend with the wind because that night was the moment that Nicodemus found himself face to face with *"the Son of Man"*, namely Jesus, who had descended from heaven just as Daniel prophesied some 500 years before that he would. And the point here is that the moment we see the Son of Man, the moment we are given to understand who Jesus is and where Jesus came from is Judgment Day for us.

So Jesus told an Old Testament story to emphasize the urgency of Nicodemus' situation. In Numbers 21, Moses tells the story of how the Chosen People, after forty years wandering, right on the borders of the Promised Land, staged yet another tantrum about how hungry and thirsty and tired they were, regretting that they had ever listened to God and followed Moses. So God struck them with a plague of venomous serpents whose bite was fatal within the day. And as their limbs swelled up and some of them began to die, they turned to Moses and begged him to pray.

And we saw last time that God's answer to their prayers was not instant miraculous healing, but to have Moses erect a cross beam on which was nailed the bronze sculpture of the sort of Serpent that terrorized them. So anyone there who looked upon the snake on the pole miraculously survived the venom. And Jesus prophesied to Nicodemus that *"...as Moses lifted up the Serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."*

And the point is that our seeing Jesus for who he is, the Son of Man crucified, is the difference between death and life for anyone who sees the picture in his mind's eye. And it is against this backdrop of the Serpent on the Pole that John 3:16, the most well known verse of Scripture should be understood.

Because the point of Jesus' words is not how much God loved us, rather it is how, in what way, the sight of his Son on a Cross would save our souls. Properly translated, John 3:16 should read: *"For in this way God loved us, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."*

In other words, Jesus is saying that you and I and Nicodemus all are snake-bitten people and it is only through the lifting up of Christ on a cross that the curse of the Serpent is rendered harmless

against us. He goes on: “*For God did not send his Son into the world to judge the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*” And the point is that God the Son has appeared in human flesh in advance of Judgment Day to give us a chance, to provide an opportunity for Adam’s snake bitten race to see him for who he is and trust him to save us.

Jesus put it this way, he said, “*This is the judgment, that light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who practices evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest their works should be exposed. But he who does what is true comes to the light that it may be clearly shown that his works are carried out by God.*”

So God’s judgment then is not that every snake-bitten human soul should perish as the natural, inevitable consequence of being born in sin. Instead, “*the Son of Man*” has been “*lifted up*” and “*the light has come into the world*” to afford snake-bitten people like you and me the chance that old Israel enjoyed when they were snake-bitten in the wilderness. But strangely, many of us will shy away from the forgiveness Jesus offers because it comes hand in hand with God’s light. And the normal sinful human response to light is to hide from it because God’s truth so clearly “*exposes*”, the evil that lives in all our hearts. But there is a sort of person who “*does what is true*”.

And that person, Jesus tells us “*comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out by God.*” We should note carefully that the person who comes to the light is not, on his own merits, better than a person who hates the light for fear his sins will be exposed and confronted. Believers are not intrinsically kinder, smarter, more functional, more accomplished than unbelievers.

Rather, believers can approach Christ and bear his light because we believe that the good we do is, as Jesus said, “*carried out by God.*” God does the work. So it is not our attitude, our sincerity, our warmth or our accomplishments that will save us. It is the birth from above, the wind from heaven, the movement of the Spirit that draws us toward Christ and makes us resemble God as children will.

So Jesus has warned Nicodemus, not so much to be more kind or sincere or zealous, but more to be humble and open hearted about how much he needs and how possible it is for the Spirit to work in his heart. So Nicodemus had come there that night to do Jesus a favor, to bestow old Israel’s approval on the signs Jesus did and the gospel he taught, but in fact it was Nicodemus who needed approval and power from Jesus. Because Christ was “*the Son of Man*”, who had “*descended from heaven*” just as Daniel saw he would. It was Christ who was nailed to a crossbeam to save us from the venom that lives in our hearts because the Serpent has struck us. Look to him and we will live!