

**Sermon for 3-11-18**  
**John 3:14-21**  
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Indulge me, for a moment, and listen to the opening words of the Gospel according to John:

*"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

*There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world."*

The true light, which enlightens everyone -- this is how John, the Beloved Disciple, describes Jesus. Throughout John's Gospel, Jesus is identified (and identifies himself) as a source of light -- true light, light that shines in a world full of darkness, light that reveals, light that endures. The language of darkness and light permeates John's Gospel. This Gospel, when compared with the three synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), is not so much a faithful report of the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth but rather an intentionally symbolic and mystical vehicle for spiritual enlightenment. Where the other Gospels hope to be read, John hopes to be prayed over; where the other Gospels seek comprehension, John seeks delving, inhabiting, and discernment. At times, John's Gospel seems like a riddle, one that is frustrating and needlessly obscure and prone to misunderstanding. I think that's why I like it so much.

In the verses Deacon Rick read for us a few moments ago, from the 3rd chapter, Jesus talks about his role as the light of the world, and the challenge his light presents to all who inhabit the world. Here are his words:

*"This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 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."*

Think about cockroaches. Disgusting, nasty, disease-ridden cockroaches. Perhaps you are lucky enough that you've never lived in a home or an apartment that had cockroaches. But if you have lived with these nastiest of roommates, you know that they love the dark. Cockroaches stay hidden during the day, and are active at night. And if you happen to turn on the light while they're going about their disgusting business, the roaches will scatter<sup>i</sup> -- because their incredible survival instincts tell them that they must avoid being seen at all costs. Cockroaches, those hardiest of pests, could be a mascot for the people Jesus describes when he says "all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed."

Light and darkness. Before we go any further in our exploration of these verses, we must acknowledge that the language of light and darkness has a long history of being used by people with skin like mine to oppress and exploit people of color both here in the United States and around the world. Words of Holy Scripture have been weaponized by those with power and ill intent and used to deny, demean, and destroy children of God time and again... this vicious selfishness disguised as faithful observance existed long before the time of Jesus, it nailed him to a cross, and it continues today its attempts to crucify anyone it sees as an other or a threat.

We know that the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the true light of the world, has nothing in common with those who preach hatred and supremacy. When Jesus speaks of light and darkness, he's not talking about color, of skin or of anything else. He's talking about truth and knowledge, revelation and exposure. He's talking about willingness to be seen and known, by God and by our fellow humans, for who we really are.

Here's the context: in the verses immediately before today's reading, Jesus receives an unexpected nighttime visitor -- Nicodemus, who is a leader among the Pharisees. Nicodemus admits to Jesus that he is impressed by the stories of signs and miracles, and he acknowledges that Jesus must be from God if he can do these things, but he questions Jesus's teachings. He cannot accept or understand what Jesus tells him about the reality of the kingdom of God and the newness of life that comes through the action of the Spirit in the waters of baptism. Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the night, under cover of darkness, because he does not want to be seen in the light of day. Darkness, then, becomes a symbol of secrecy and dishonesty; Nicodemus wants to conceal the truth and uses the darkness to cover up his time with Jesus.

Jesus, meanwhile, has no patience for this kind of dishonesty -- where Nicodemus makes a very practical decision to preserve his reputation by coming to Jesus in the night, Jesus sees a lack of integrity and a willful concealment of truth. Jesus goes on to position himself as the revealer of truth, the light whose very existence threatens to expose all dishonesty and deceit. Listen to verse 19 again: "This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil."

The judgment Jesus describes here is based on our response to the light. Those who do good, and are honest with themselves and with others about who they are, have nothing to fear from the light. When the light shines on an honest person, one with integrity, he or she can stand firm. But when the light shines on a dishonest person, one without integrity, he or she will run away to the cover of darkness (like our friends the cockroaches), lest the truth be revealed. The light is dangerous for those who live without integrity, whose words and deeds do not match, who seem to be two-faced (or three- or four-faced, for that matter).

It's not just hardened criminals, or cheating spouses, or lying politicians who avoid the light. It's all of us, from time to time. I know that for me, the most humbling and convicting moments come when I realize that whatever I have said or done or

thought is something I would not want revealed on a Sunday morning -- when I say something insulting or hurtful, when I ignore someone in need, when I judge another person self-righteously, when I choose my own comfort and convenience over the well-being of my neighbors. These are the things I want to cover up, to keep secret, to erase; but of course, what I really want and need (what we all want and need) is forgiveness. It is only when we allow Christ's light to shine into our darkest places, when we acknowledge our sins and repent, that we can know and feel the gift of limitless mercy and grace given to us by our Redeemer.

The Greek word that's translated here as judgment is *krisis* -- it's the source of our English word *crisis*. A crisis is a dramatic moment, one that requires decision and action. A crisis is serious, and it has big implications. The crisis Jesus describes is this -- the True Light has entered the world in his incarnation. Everywhere the Light shines, that is, everywhere his Gospel is proclaimed, God's children must choose how they respond, how they will live.<sup>ii</sup> Some will choose to stand in the light, to do the difficult work of living with integrity and openness and humility. Others will run from the light, because they cannot risk being exposed and are not willing to change their ways.

The Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s was, in many ways, a crisis moment of struggle between light and darkness. Not light versus dark shades of skin, mind you, but light versus dark philosophies; truthful, honest, courageous people seeking to honor one another's dignity and humanity versus fearful, stubborn, selfish, people who claimed to be more valuable, more worthy, more human than their fellow children of God. Those who were on the wrong side of history -- the segregationists and supremacists -- so often committed their most dastardly deeds, their greatest evils, under cover of darkness:

- young Emmett Till was kidnapped, tortured, and murdered at night;
  - Medgar Evers was gunned down in his own driveway at night;
  - crosses were burned on lawns and bombs were planted in churches at night.
- It was, and is, just as Jesus said: evildoers love darkness, and fear the light.

This past week marked the 53rd anniversary of "Bloody Sunday," the day in 1965 when peaceful protesters marching across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama were attacked by police officers armed with tear gas and billy clubs. As I watched media coverage of the anniversary, at the same time as I was reflecting on this Gospel lesson, I suddenly remembered a story that had stuck in my mind from an amazing book called *A Child Shall Lead Them*, about young people's courage and leadership in the Civil Rights movement. During one of the many demonstrations in Selma in response to "Bloody Sunday," the local sheriff instructed his deputies to round up over a hundred teenage protesters and force them to run more than two miles through the countryside, hurling insults and burning them with cattle prods if they showed signs of fatigue. One nine-year-old boy was forced to make the run barefoot. And a fifteen-year-old was clubbed across his face for having the audacity to look one of the deputies in the eye and say three incredibly powerful words: "God sees you."<sup>iii</sup>

"God sees you." Those three simple words expressed a Truth that this particular evildoer was unable to tolerate in that moment -- that his actions were seen and known by the God of all Creation. "God sees you." The Truth is -- the Truth that we know and that brave young man knew -- that there is no darkness powerful enough to shield anything on earth or in heaven from God's view. People may hide their selfish, hurtful, and hateful words and deeds from each other and from themselves in a variety of ways... but God sees them. God knows that which we try so diligently to obscure, or reframe, or justify. God knows our sin; and God has given us a Light that promises healing and reconciliation and peace, if we are willing to step into that Light over and over again and leave behind the lure of darkness.

We are called to be People of the Light. People of the Light do not fear the truth, even when it is inconvenient or surprising. People of the Light do not hide their words or deeds; they do not show one face on Sunday morning and another at work, or at home, or in the public square. People of the Light seek knowledge; they are willing to humble themselves and repent and change their ways; they are honest with others and with themselves. People of the Light are truth-tellers, who

make secrets known and bring what is hidden out into the open. People of the Light are courageous, and faithful, and good. Let us commit ourselves today to seeking the Light, letting the Light shine on our darkest places, and living as People of the Light in the days to come. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> analogy from *Sundays and Seasons: Year B 2015* (133).

<sup>ii</sup> interpretation of *krisis* from W. Hulitt Gloer in *Feasting on the Word: Year B Volume II* (121).

<sup>iii</sup> from the account of John Lewis, in *A Child Shall Lead Them* by Rufus Burrow Jr. (237-238).