

what r u up 2? “Light UP”

A sermon by Pastor Steve Easterday-McPadden
for First UMC, Grand Junction, Sunday, March 10, 2024

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Scripture Text: John 3:16-21 [NRSV]

OPENING

The context for this passage is the conversation Jesus had under cover of darkness with a leading member of the Pharisees, Nicodemus.

(*Do some teaching on the Pharisees and their role in Jesus’ story and on Nicodemus’ place in it in John 3. Do you give Nicodemus the benefit of the doubt or do you look at him with suspicion?*)

How about the other places in John where Nic is prominent, 7:50 and 19:39? What about Nicodemus now?

TO THE SCRIPTURES

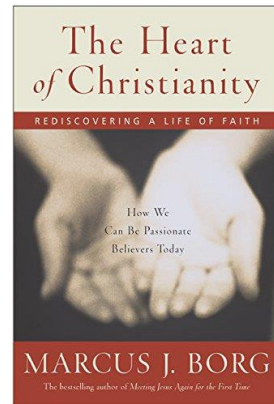
- John 3:3 and the Greek for being “born again” or “born from above” – γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν. When Nic questions this in v. 4, Jesus interprets the idea in v. 5 as being born “of water *AND* Spirit” (emphasis mine). (*Unpack this a bit as a metaphor for being transformed by one’s relationship with God.*)

- The passage breaks neatly into two different sections with v. 17 every bit as important as v. 16:
 1. John 3:16-18. Belief in Jesus as the Son of God
 - ¹⁶ “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.
 - ¹⁷ “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. ¹⁸ 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.

SERMON THOUGHTS

- The sense of 3:18b: Not God judging or condemning but of us being responsible for choices we make and accepting the consequences.
- Concern about the “applied” narrowness of 3:16, believing a narrowly defined and traditionally accepted doctrine = *orthodoxy* test. It’s not Jesus’ understanding I’m calling into question, it’s the way we can end up distorting it or misunderstanding it or misinterpreting it that I struggle with.

- A great time to unpack Marcus Borg's expansion of what it means to "believe" or to "have faith" [Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 28-37]



1. Faith as *assensus*...i.e., "assent". Opposite: Disbelief / rejection
 2. Faith as *fiducia*...i.e., "fiduciary" / "trust" (*Lake Powell illustration*). Opposite: anxiety / worry
 3. Faith as *fidelitas*...i.e., "fidelity" / faithfulness. Opposite: adultery
 4. Faith as *visio*...i.e., "vision". Opposite: blindness
- These lead to "orthopraxy", what we're emphasizing this Lenten season. This kind of faith / belief is also the evidence of one's being born ἄνωθεν – "again" or "from above".

BACK TO THE SCRIPTURES

The second part of the passage:

2. John 3:19-21. Preferring darkness to light because of sin / guilt – OR – not being concerned about the light because of a clear conscience.

¹⁹ *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.*

²⁰ *For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.* ²¹ *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."*

SERMON THOUGHTS

- What does "shunning the light" look like in our times? Lots of things, actually, but for sure:
 - Refusal to accept responsibility for one's actions,
 - Blaming others,
 - Creating diversions and delay tactics to ward off justice, etc.

These are all part of "shunning the light", and help us (1) to check our own behaviors and (2) to evaluate the behaviors of others.

Those who are "born again" or "born from above" censure these behaviors – in ourselves and in others, no matter who they are. We don't condone them.

🎵 CONCLUSION

One of my favorite hymns is "Immortal, Invisible God Only Wise"; it's #103 in our hymnal.

The words speak of the glory, the ineffable nature, the splendor of God in terms of dazzling, even blinding, light. But verse 3 also affirms that that same mysterious, life-giving and life-changing power dwells in us. In fact, the hymn names this as our "true life", with the implication that everything else is false.

So, when we shun this Light, when we prefer darkness to this Light, we are acting against our very nature, and we call down upon ourselves the judgement of God. Not my words – those are straight from the Gospel.

Put positively, ...*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.*

Let us sing verses 1, 3, & 4 of this majestic hymn, not just as a declaration of faith but as a plea for transformation in our lives.

BENEDICTION

The last two verses of Psalm 139:

²³ *Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.*

²⁴ *Point out anything in me that offends you,
and lead me along the path of everlasting life. [NLT]*