

“Aligned with the Light”

Many years ago, we moved into an apartment right here in Bells Corners. It was late fall when we moved in and the days were getting short. It was dark when I left for work in the morning and dark when I got home. The apartment was cozy though and I was proud to have this independence. Every weekend, I would head out after work to the farm where we had previously been staying near North Gower to be with friends and then back on Sunday night to get ready for the week ahead. More dark mornings followed by dark evenings. One weekend, however, things changed. We had a friend come to visit and so stayed home. On Saturday morning, I woke up with the sunlight streaming in the window... Suddenly things looked a whole lot different in that little apartment! The walls were in desperate need of paint, the carpet was dingy, there were cobwebs in corners that I had never noticed before. Even the windows themselves were pretty grungy.

Suddenly this cozy little place didn't look the same at all.

Even when I went back to work on that dark Monday morning and home again in the dark – I couldn't see the place the same way. I could only see the things that needed fixing and cleaning.

Light is like that sometimes. It exposes things we might not notice. Without it, imperfections are covered up and can be ignored. We can be lulled into thinking everything is just fine. I think I could have gone on being quite comfortable in that dingy apartment for a long, long time, if I had just stayed in the dark. Now, however, I was faced with a choice. I could continue to just keep the lights low – especially if I had company! – or I could get busy with some paint and a steam cleaner. I could pretend that everything was just lovely or I could face reality and do something about it.

The reading from John this morning is just a part of a longer conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. He's an interesting character, this Nicodemus. He is a prominent player in the courts of the Temple. He is a Pharisee – one of those men who devotes his life to studying the Jewish laws. He is a member of the Sanhedrin, the Temple court. We know that the Pharisees have been disturbed by Jesus for some time. After all, he seems to flaunt those laws and he speaks as one with authority – as if his interpretation surpasses that of this learned group of men.

This conversation takes place shortly after Jesus has caused a great furor in the Temple – the “temple tantrum” that Rev. Kim talked about last week. He has the peasant folk really fired up! Jerusalem is full of pilgrims observing the Passover and Roman soldiers who are there to keep the peace. Jesus is really stirring things up and the Sanhedrin is realizing that they need to do something about this “problem”. He is threatening the peace. He is drawing unwanted attention to the business of the Temple. He is a threat to the status quo – a very comfortable status for that group of men. And while they try to come up with a plan to stop this rabble

rouser, Nicodemus slips away under the cover of night to talk to Jesus, to try to understand what he is all about.

I like this character! While everyone else seems caught up in the controversy surrounding Jesus, and judging him to be a threat, Nicodemus takes the time to listen. He asks questions. He strives to understand.

He appears two more times in John's story of Jesus' last days. As the Sanhedrin continue to look for ways to silence Jesus, Nicodemus reminds them that the law requires that a person be heard before he is judged. He takes a stand to try to shine some light on the situation. Even *after* the crucifixion, Nicodemus is there, helping Joseph of Arimathea prepare Jesus' body for burial. I wonder what his Sanhedrin colleagues thought of this ... or if they even noticed. Sometimes it's more comfortable to stay in the shadows and avert your eyes when someone shines a light.

This is what Jesus was getting at when he spoke to Nicodemus at that secret night time meeting...

“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. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.”

“The light has come into the world” – and it's exposing all the dingy places. It's putting the unpleasant reality out where it can be seen.

That's a pretty uncomfortable thing for anyone who benefits from that evil. It's a whole lot easier to enjoy the comforts of life if you don't look at the cost those comforts have to others or to the environment. It's easier to enjoy the bargain I got on that new shirt if I don't look at the working conditions of the people in the Bangladesh factory where it was made. It's easier to enjoy the convenience of Styrofoam take-out containers and one-use plastic utensils if I don't think about how long those things will stay in the landfill. It's more comfortable to believe that the change in our climate is part of the natural cycle of things than to give up our addiction to oil.

Even once the light has exposed the issues, we can choose to turn it off, ignore it, stay cozy and comfortable in the dark. It might make us feel comfortable – but it doesn't solve the problems. We don't need God to condemn us then, says Jesus. We have already condemned ourselves.

Jesus says to Nicodemus, “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. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already...”

Jesus' mission was not to strike down the Roman Empire in the name of God. It wasn't to put the greedy tax collectors or the corrupt priests into prison. Jesus' mission, as he

saw it, was to shine a light on the destruction that those behaviours and attitudes had on the world. To shine that light and keep it shining in spite of the discomfort it caused - to others and to himself.

Standing in that light and keeping it shining is not always an easy or romantic task. In fact, it's downright tough and often scary. Following that example, keeping that light shining even after his arrest, conviction and execution takes real commitment and courage. It wasn't easy for Jesus. It was even harder for the disciples. It's still hard for us today.

It seems to me that this is the challenge Jesus offers us: to shine the light, to sustain the light, to be the light – to align ourselves with that light.

This reading contains the well-known and often quoted verse, John 3:16

“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.”

It is usually quoted on its own, removed from the bigger context of this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. It is used, often, to say that belief in Jesus is the way – and the only way - to eternal life. It seems to say that God loves some of us, the ones who profess belief, and not others. But listen again... “God so loved *the world*” To me that means all of it, everyone and all of it, not just a select few who say the right words. Jesus then, we might say, was here to show us the way to save this world.

And what does it mean to “believe” in Jesus, this Son of God, after all? Is it simply an intellectual and spiritual acceptance of him? I think if we read the whole story – John's story, Mathew's, Mark's, Luke's, Paul's... all the accounts of what this man was all about, the answer is that believing in him means aligning ourselves with his message; it means entering into the kind of life-sustaining relationship that God wants us to have – with God, with each other, and with all of creation. It means taking up that challenge, committing ourselves to aligning ourselves with Jesus' message and example – aligning ourselves with the light.

And what is the reward for all of this? A promise of eternal life.

And I will challenge this word “eternal” as well. Just what does it mean? It could mean a promise that we will live forever, a promise of life after our physical bodies cease to function. That's a wonderful and comforting thought. It has sustained many of us throughout the ages. It can be understood in many different ways. For some, it might mean a literal rising from the grave when Jesus comes again. For some it means keeping alive the memory and the spirit of those we have lost. Different translators have even used words other than “eternal” in this passage. Eugene Peterson's translation “The Message”, for instance, promises a “whole and lasting life”. Others have used the words “life abundant”. No matter how it is understood or translated, I think it is something we all desire – life that goes on, rich, abundant, and eternal. And “God so loved the *world* that we have been given this example, this model of how to make that

happen, in the form of Jesus Christ. It's possible if we believe – in Jesus, in his example and teachings, if we buy in - and if we make the commitment to live our lives in alignment with them.

When the Hebrew people were crossing the wilderness, leaving behind a life of slavery and oppression and heading for the Promised Land, they often lost sight of the reason for the journey. They complained about the food, the lack of water, the dangers of traveling in a wild and unknown place. They were bitten by serpents. They cried for mercy. And Moses, at God's bidding put a bronze serpent on a pole as a sign of healing. "It's not easy, it's frightening, it's dangerous – but keep your eyes on this sign and you'll be healed. Life will get better, the Promised Land is still ahead. Keep walking, one step at a time... Keep your eyes on me."

Jesus relates that wilderness story to Nicodemus that dark night. Just like that serpent, he says, the Son of Man must be lifted up. Was this a foreshadowing of what was to happen to him? Of the dangerous and frightening time leading up to his crucifixion? Perhaps. Or maybe he was referring to the sometimes dangerous and frightening experience of following his example. Perhaps he is saying, "Keep your eyes on me." Keep moving and trust that this is the way to healing for the world. One step at a time. Don't look down and lose heart. "Keep your eyes on me."

Robert Sailer, in his book "Preaching the Adventure of Passion" writes this,

"What would it mean for Christians to live as if the drama of following Christ's sacrificial love for God's world truly were a struggle that requires courage, the fortitude of faith, and character formation – all because something truly is at stake."

It's not always comfortable to turn on the bright overhead light and see the world as it really is. It's tempting to turn the glare off again and manage with the soft light of a candle or a bedside lamp. When I think back to that first apartment here in Bells Corners, I remember that it was very tempting to do just that and avoid the work it would take to set things right. And I knew that I would never be truly happy with things as they were. And I would always be worried that someone might show up at my door on a sunny day and reveal the dinginess I knew was there.

Jesus asks us to feel that way about the world. Open the curtains! Turn on those lights! Be brave and stand there with open eyes and a willingness to take on the job of making a change. "One step at a time, hard and scary as it may seem," he says, "I'm here to guide the way. Keep your eyes on me."

Amen