

“Come Into the Light of Love”
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John 3:16-21

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. ¹⁸Those 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. ¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But 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.”

Alfred Lord Tennyson was a poet in the 1800s. If you don't know his name, you probably know some of his quotes: “Theirs not to reason why, Theirs but to do and die” is one of the more famous. Perhaps his *most* famous quote is this: “’Tis better to have loved and lost / Than never to have loved at all.” The story is told that when early printers, using handset type, received an order to print a collection of Tennyson's poems, they immediately ordered hundreds of extra letters L and V for their presses. They knew Tennyson. He used the word “love” so often in his poetry that the average set of type could not possibly supply all the necessary letters. *Love* – it is such an important concept for us to understand. It is such an important facet of God for us to attempt to grasp. We have just read a verse that is likely the most well-known verse in the New Testament. It is the verse that Martin Luther called “the heart of the Bible – the gospel in miniature.” It is the

verse that people hand-write onto large signs to hold up at sporting events and other televised events. It is the verse that football players have written in the black marks under their eyes. You know what that verse is: John 3:16. We all know that verse. Probably all of us can recite it from memory. For God so loved the world...*you know the rest*. It is the major theme of the Bible, of God's revelation of God's very nature to us. God is love. It is not just that God loves us, but that God is *love itself*. 1 John 4:8 says "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." We cannot understand the concept of love apart from God, for love is the defining feature of God. All of Tennyson's poems about love *combined* cannot express God's overwhelming love for us. In the Broadway musical "Aspects of Love," there is a song called "Love Changes Everything." The lyrics of that song include these lines: "Love, love changes everything, hands and faces, earth and sky. Love, love changes everything, how you live and how you die. . . Yes, love, love changes everything . . . live or perish in its name. Love will never ever let you be the same." That song is about romantic love for one another, but all love is a reflection of God's love for us. For God so **loved** the world... We were made to reflect that love.

But that's not all that this passage of scripture has to tell us. We have, for centuries, focused in on verse 16 to the exclusion of the rest of this passage. We have ignored such important concepts as "God did not send the Son into the world to **condemn** the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." So often the church *has* used the name of God to condemn others. We have been guilty of condemning those who believe differently than we do. We have condemned those who worship differently than we do. We have condemned those whose politics or memberships are different from ours. We have condemned others, forgetting that it is not up to us to condemn anyone. That call belongs to God, and Jesus told us that God did not send Him here to condemn the world, but to make it possible for us to be saved through Jesus.

We forget that God *so* loved *the world* – not just us, or those who think like us, look like us, or believe like us. God sent Jesus here not to condemn because God loves *all of us*.

But there's even more to this passage. There is a harsh truth in verse 19. We've got the feel-good stuff of verse 16 – God loves everyone. That continues in 17-18: God is not condemning the whole world, but is giving an option for salvation through believing in Jesus Christ. Then verse 19 comes and slaps us in the face. It is outright jarring what Jesus says next. "This is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil." Ouch.

Many people, myself included, have trouble with the reduced daylight in winter. It is challenging to many of us for it to be dark outside by 4:00 in the evening. But today, we've entered daylight saving time again. The almanac has today's sunset occurring at 6:56 PM, for a day length of 11 hours, 46 minutes. It just gets longer and longer, so that in three months, the day length will be over 15 hours, with a sunset at 8:25 PM. Many of us enjoy this extra daylight and spend time outdoors with family and friends. We **don't** love the darkness rather than light! We love the light! What *is* Jesus talking about?

But, of course, He isn't speaking in strictly literal terms. While some people do like to operate under cover of darkness to conceal their deeds, most of us prefer instead a spiritual darkness. We are making our way through the season of Lent, where we spend time in self-examination and reflection, and I think we have to note how often we prefer darkness to light.

We prefer darkness to light when we judge others as not being as worthy as we are of God's love, even though we know that God loves us all on God's own initiative, not because of anything we could ever do to earn it. God loves those who are in worship this morning; and God

loves just as much those who are not. God's love is not determined by our actions, but *we* prefer darkness by trying to restrict who God can love.

We prefer darkness to light when we are ashamed of who we are. Self-confidence and self-centeredness are not the same thing. Too often, we hide our gifts and talents from the world because we are afraid of what they will think of us. Too often, we shrink back in situations that call out for us to speak up because we don't know how others will react. Self-confidence is healthy and does not lead to self-centeredness, which comes from other motivations. Self-confidence is loving who God created us to be and using the gifts God gave us for the good of all. When we shy away from doing what is right, from being ourselves, we prefer darkness to light.

We prefer darkness to light by our prejudices, whether it be due to race or gender or nationality or language or whatever. God created wonderful diversity in this world. Can you imagine a world where everyone else was just like you? I'm not sure if that would be more boring or infuriating, but it is not the world that God graciously created for us. We are called to honor that diversity by seeking out people who are different from us and being in relationship with people whose differences complement us. When we hide away with only those just like us, we are preferring darkness to light.

When we refuse to seek out God's will for our lives, or refuse to *follow* God's will for our lives, we prefer darkness to light. When we judge the motives of others without knowing why they do what they do, we prefer darkness to light. When we push others away from us, we prefer darkness to light. And when we fail to spread the good news – that 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 – when we do not share with those who have not heard that good news, we prefer darkness to light.

Yes, Jesus knew that we, much more often than we care to admit, prefer darkness to light. But He also knew the power of light and that just a little bit of light is enough to overcome the dark. Darkness and light are major themes in the Gospel of John, going back to the first chapter. Verse five of that first chapter reads “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” You see, that’s the amazing thing about light. It is not overcome by darkness. If you enter a dark room with a candle, the darkness does not snuff out the light – the light shines ever more brightly in the dark.

The cave heard a voice calling to it: “Come up into the light... come and see the sunshine.” The cave replied: “I don't know what you mean; there isn't anything here but darkness.” Finally the cave ventured forth and was surprised to see light all around. Looking up to the sun, the cave said: “Come with me and see my darkness.” The sun agreed and entered the cave....“Now show me your darkness.” But there was no darkness.

The light of God’s truth overcomes the darkness of our lives, but we have to stop hiding from the light of God and let that light shine through us. All around us, there *is* pain and suffering, misery and loss. There is prejudice and hatred, fear and distrust. There is great darkness. But God *so loved* the world....that He sent His light into the world, and that light can overcome any darkness. Let us allow God’s light to shine through us to overcome darkness wherever we are. Amen.