

“Light of the World, Shine on Me”¹

Those of you that have been participating in the study of the Gospel of Mark have heard how Mark is a master storyteller. He takes accounts he has inherited from the Jesus tradition and puts them together in compelling ways. His Gospel invites the hearer into the narrative and creates opportunities for greater understanding of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. One of the gifts of the evangelist in The Gospel of John is setting memorable scenes. Today’s setting is one of the best. Unfortunately, today’s reading skips the set-up of the story.

This passage begins with a man named Nicodemus seeking out Jesus at night. Nicodemus is a member of the Great Sanhedrin; a court of Jewish elders who functioned like our Supreme Court hearing and ruling on legal and also religious matters. Nicodemus had heard about the traveling rabbi, preacher, and healer named Jesus of Nazareth. What he has heard is compelling and he wants to meet with Jesus in person to learn more, but Nicodemus is afraid. He knows that others that sit on the Sanhedrin are opposed to Jesus. They believe Jesus’ popularity with the people could cause trouble for them with their Roman overlords. Despite Israel being a conquered state within the Roman Empire, Jews are allowed to practice their religion. They do not want to lose this privilege.

Nicodemus, concerned that his fellow elders will look unfavorably on his meeting Jesus, seeks an audience with him at night. Darkness is also a great foil for the darkness that surrounds humanity; a darkness that Jesus says “people loved” more than the light.

As twilight turns to night, Jesus tells Nicodemus something we think he knows. That is that the world is shrouded in darkness. Although many cry out for the light of God those in power enjoy the darkness for that is where their deeds of evil can be done. Deeds of evil that include plotting to destroy Jesus and his followers.

Consider the juxtaposition of the Sanhedrin which meets in secret and in a dark inner chamber to plot the demise of Jesus, with Jesus who teaches and preaches outdoors in the light where all can see and hear. Deeds done in the dark will be known for nothing is secret from God. Deeds done in the light do not need to be revealed.

One of my favorite movies of all time is “Born Yesterday” written by Garson Kanin and starring Judy Holliday. At a pivotal point in the movie Judy’s character, Billie Dawn (more light language), tells her mentor something about her father. She says, “He always used to say, ‘Never do nothin’ you wouldn’t want printed on the front page of *The New York Times*.’” It is the secular version of what Jesus is telling us.

¹ From “Love is the Answer” by Todd Rundgren©1977

While the light will expose evil, the most important of the light aspect is that those things which are “true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”² The work of God is done in the light. It does not need to be hidden. Indeed, the light of God will shine forth upon them and the light of God will be reflected into the world to enlighten all the world to God’s justice and truth.

I doubt than any of us are so filled with the light that we could live our lives on the cover of *The New York Times*. We all have our peccadillos and our sins—big and small. We all fail at some time or another. That is part of the human condition. That is why Jesus emphasizes, “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

The point of the light is not shame. There is enough of that already going around. The point of the light is to help us see our way ahead more clearly. It is so that we might find our way along the path that Jesus has marked out for us.

God does not hate the world. God does not hate us. God is not in the business of punishing us. God wants us to find our way. “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.”³

Martin Luther said that John 3:16 is the gospel in miniature. That verse tells us what God has wanted for us from before the beginning of time. That is what God has wanted from the day the first people were formed. Indeed, from the day each of us was “fearfully and wonderfully made”⁴ in our mother’s womb God has only wanted for us goodness and mercy. God loves us in all our frailty and infirmity. Do not be afraid to step into the light of Christ. That is where we are meant to live today and for all time.

² John 3:21 NRSV

³ John 3:16 NRSV

⁴ Psalm 139:4 KJV