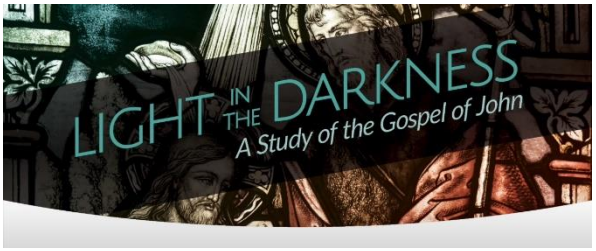
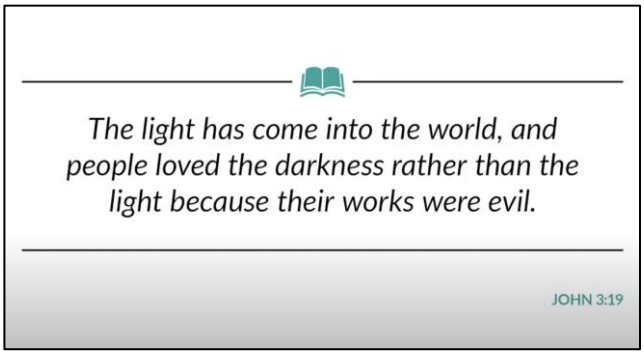
Light in the Darkness: A Study of the Gospel of John
Session 2: "*Exposed by the Light*" (Jan. 17, 2022)
Father Jonathan Bailes
Reading: John chapters 5-8
Focus Verses: John 4:7-30



Lesson Summary:
In John 1:5, John describes the entrance of Jesus into the world as light entering into darkness. Jesus says something similar in 3:19. He says that the light has come into the world, but that people loved the darkness rather than the light. But why should people love the darkness rather than the light? What does that even mean? In this session, we will explore these questions by discussing the two important conversations which Jesus has in chapters 3 and 4, the first with Nicodemus and the second with the Samaritan woman. When these two people meet Jesus, he brings light into them precisely by exposing their own internal darkness and need. Despite their attempts to direct the conversation elsewhere, Jesus forces them to come to terms with the truth about themselves. And through their examples, we learn something important about what it means for Jesus to be the Light of the World. Jesus sheds light on those parts of our lives that we'd rather remain hidden. It can be very uncomfortable. We can try to avoid it. But in the end, it's the only way to find true life.

I've entitled this study of the Gospel of John "Light in the Darkness." I've done that for a couple of reasons.

First, because it's a phrase that John himself uses in that introductory section that we discussed in our last session. John 1:4 refers to the Son as the "light of men." And then in verse 5, John says that the "light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it." Jesus also says something very similar in John 3:19, when he's talking about his reason for coming into the world. He describes his arrival by saying:

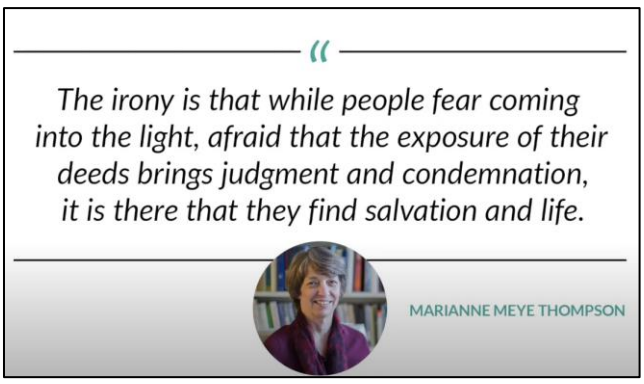


Active Opposition to the Light
That's very similar to what we read in chapter one, but with a little bit of a twist. Because now Jesus's words make it clear that the darkness that's being referred to is not just a matter of ignorance - people not knowing. The darkness that John and then Jesus refer to is active opposition to the light. Christ is a light that gives life, John says in his opening verses.

But then Jesus says that this is a light that people resist. They oppose it. They don't want the light. They prefer, he says, the darkness. They love the darkness because their works are evil.

Hiding in the Darkness
It may be that should come as no surprise. After all, anyone who has ever experienced shame knows what it feels like - know what makes the darkness so attractive. We love the darkness because the darkness hides us, hides all those things which we'd rather not have anyone know. All those things we'd rather just avoid. As long as you can stay in the dark and the shadows, you can feel safe. But as soon as you step into the light, then you're exposed.

But there's an irony to this attitude of our love of the darkness and being hidden. As the New Testament scholar Marianne Meye Thompson points out in her commentary on the Gospel of John:



That's exactly what we find in the Gospel of John. People meet Jesus, and in meeting him, they are brought into the light - and that can be very uncomfortable. But it is there in the light (as they're exposed) where they find life and salvation.

That is what I want to begin to explore together in this session - what it looks like to encounter the unsettling, exposing light that is Jesus. To do that, I want to focus on two stories that John tells - one in chapter 3 and then another in chapter 4. Stories about two memorable encounters that Jesus has.

One with a Samaritan woman and another one with a Jewish teacher named Nicodemus. These two encounters are very different in a lot of ways, but they share something in common. Both of these two people were living in the dark and Jesus, when he meets them, he exposes them. It is through that exposure, through that light being shown on their darkness, that they begin to discover life.

Jesus and Nicodemus

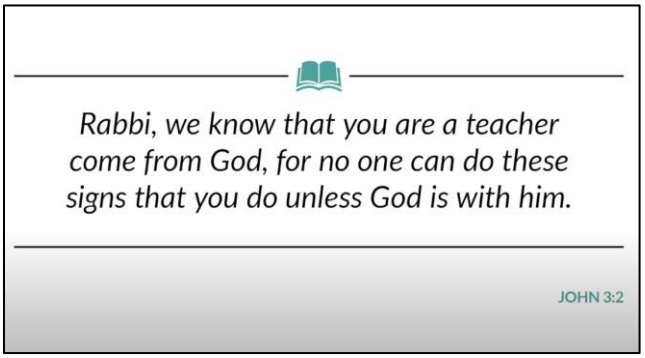
But right now, I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's begin with the first of John's two stories - the one which can be found in John 3:1-21. It's a story of a conversation between Jesus and a man named Nicodemus. And John doesn't tell us very much about this man other than the fact that he's regarded as a leader among the Jews and that he was a member of the very serious Jewish sect known as the Pharisees.

The Meeting at Night

But John does mention one curious fact about this man's visit. He says that Nicodemus came to speak with Jesus at night. This little detail has suggested to some people that Nicodemus was afraid or that he was ashamed of being seen with Jesus. That's why he came at night. But there's no real evidence for that.

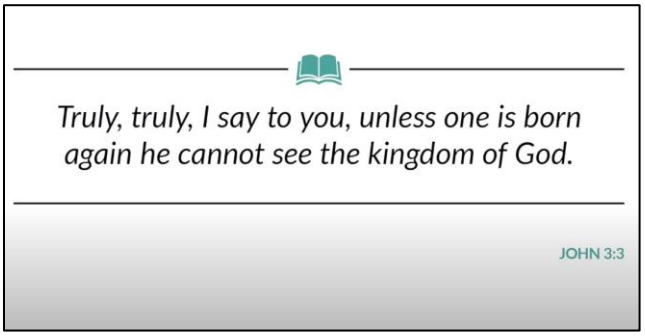
It actually seems more likely that John's mention of the night time is meant to tell us something else about Nicodemus. Not his psychological state of wanting to avoid people seeing him meeting with Jesus, but rather that when he comes to Jesus, this is John's way of helping us realize that Nicodemus himself is still in the dark.

The question is how - how is he in the dark? If you pay attention to the back and forth between him and Jesus, you can start to get an idea. Nicodemus starts off the conversation by addressing Jesus as a teacher.



These are not the words of someone who's hostile toward Jesus. These are the words of someone who respects him. But notice how Nicodemus engages Jesus: he comes to him as a teacher (Rabbi), which is also how Nicodemus thinks of himself. Later in the conversation, Jesus refers to Nicodemus as a "teacher of Israel," and that tells us something about the kind of conversation that Nicodemus wants to have. He's come as one rabbi to talk to Jesus as a rabbi, to have a learned theological conversation. One teacher to another.

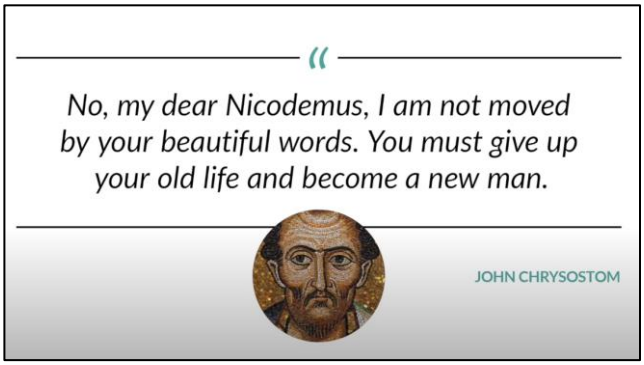
But that is not how Jesus engages him. Indeed, it seems that Jesus wants to have an entirely different sort of conversation. He doesn't want to debate the finer points of Nicodemus' understanding of the law. Jesus wants to shine some light on Nicodemus' real problem. And that's why as soon as Nicodemus finishes talking, as soon as he addresses Jesus, Jesus gets right to the heart of the matter:



Now, when you first read Jesus' response, it seems kind of odd. Jesus' words don't really seem to be

responding at all to what Nicodemus said. Nicodemus himself is very flustered by what Jesus says. He was probably expecting Jesus to return his complimentary greeting. He had addressed Jesus as a rabbi. Maybe he expected the same. Then they could have an academic discussion about the Kingdom of God. But that's not at all what Jesus does. Jesus just changes the subject entirely. He tells Nicodemus that all of his fancy education won't do him a lick of good when it comes to being a part of the Kingdom of God. He says that Nicodemus' only hope is for the Spirit of God to give him new life - to be born again, born from above.

What Jesus is saying, in effect, to Nicodemus is (to quote the church father John Chrysostom):

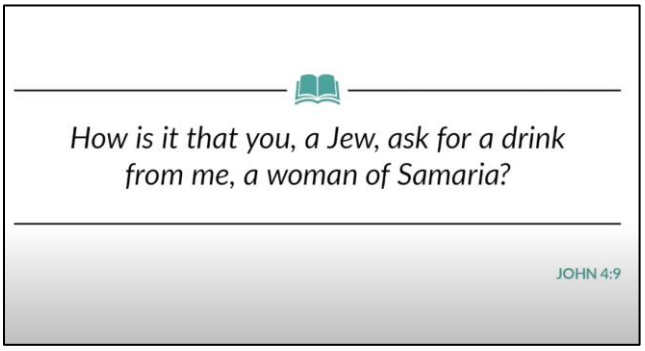


This exchange is a fascinating example of how Jesus is so quickly able to turn the tables on people. Nicodemus, this Jewish teacher, this leader, had come to have a learned discussion. But Jesus turns the conversation around immediately to talk instead about how Nicodemus is still in the dark and how only an act of God is able to bring him into the light.

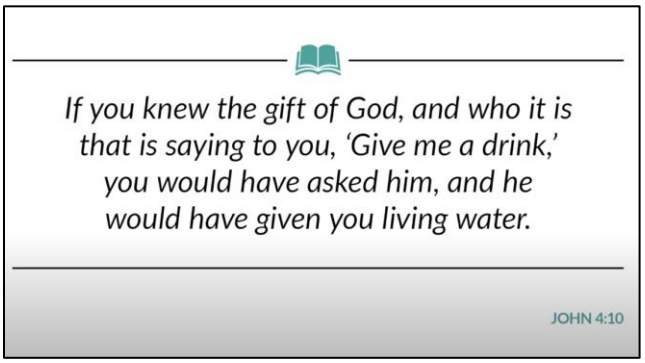
Jesus and the Samaritan Woman

If you think of their conversation from that perspective, you can see the similarities with the story that John includes in his next chapter about the Samaritan woman that meets Jesus at the well.

In many ways, this encounter seems to be the exact opposite of Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus. He, after all, was a respected Jewish teacher. She is a Samaritan, someone who is seen as a religious heretic and apostate. Not someone respected by the Jews, but someone who was despised by them. It would have been very natural for someone like Nicodemus to speak with Jesus, but a woman? And a Samaritan woman at that? Even she is astonished when Jesus sits down and engages her by asking her for a drink.



But as different as this woman is from the man who came to Jesus at night, there are also some striking similarities in their conversation with Jesus. Notice, for instance, how (just like he did with Nicodemus) Jesus immediately redirects this conversation to focus on the woman's need. She asked the question about why he is speaking to her, but he doesn't really answer that question. Instead, he says, she is the one who should be seeking him.



Then just like Nicodemus, this woman is confused. She doesn't understand what this living water is, nor was she even aware that she needed it.

Then, as their conversation continues, Jesus begins to shine some light on the darkness of her life.

"Go call your husband," he says.

"I have no husband," she responds, which is true, but only a half truth. And Jesus knows it.

"You're right", he says. "You don't have a husband. In fact, you've had five husbands, and now you're living with someone who isn't even your husband."

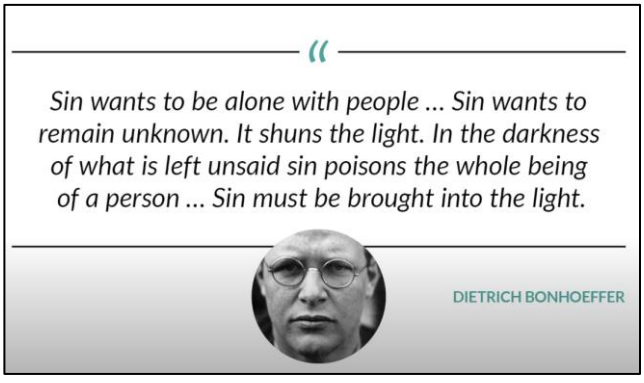
It's not hard to imagine how that woman felt when she heard Jesus say those words. Here is this Jewish rabbi that she doesn't know and all of a sudden he's talking about the things that she's most ashamed of.

You could tell she feels uncomfortable because then she tries to do the same thing that Nicodemus did. She tries to turn the conversation into an academic debate of a point of theological disagreement between Jews and Samaritans. But Jesus is very kind in his interaction with her. He doesn't rebuke her for trying to change the topic. Suddenly, he answers her question. But even in his answer, he keeps the focus on her.

She asks him about the proper place for worship, but he wants to talk to her about the darkness of her own life and how she can become a true worshipper.

There's a clear pattern in these stories - as different as Nicodemus and this woman are, they both experience the same thing when they meet Jesus. They try to talk to him about impersonal theological questions, but he's not there to debate. He's there to shine light on the darkness of their lives and to tell them how they can move into the light.

When I think about these encounters, I'm reminded of something that the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said in his book *Life Together*. He was talking about sin and about how we often try to hide our sin. We want to keep it in the dark because we're ashamed. But in the end, he says, all that hiding and all that covering up just makes it worse.



That's exactly what Jesus is doing in these two conversations. He is bringing people into the light. You could tell from their interactions that they'd rather leave certain things unsaid.

That's why they try to direct the conversation away from themselves, and they want to engage Jesus in some debate. Because if they do that, then they don't have to look at the darkness within.

Avoiding the Darkness

Of course, you and I, we do the same thing. We don't like to talk about the darkness of our own lives, the things that we feel ashamed of. We don't even want to think about it. So instead, we find other things to talk about, other things to distract ourselves. We talk about politics and sports. And then we stream movies and we listen to podcasts. We fill our lives with constant noise and endless activities. We do whatever is necessary to avoid thinking or talking about the darkness within.

That's exactly why we need Jesus, this man that we meet in the Gospel of John. Because he came as the light - he came to expose, to shine light on all those hidden parts of our lives. **And that's why, as Nicodemus and that Samaritan woman both learned, meeting Jesus can be (and often is) a very uncomfortable, very unsettling experience.**

But in the end, it's the only way to find true life. You and I may want to stay in the dark, but Jesus - the light - has come to drag us out of the darkness and to bring us into the light.

Read and reflect on John chapters 5-8 during the coming week.