

The Gospel of John
Lesson 6 – John 3:1-21
Light and Dark

This section of John contains perhaps the most well-known pieces of the scripture, John 3:16, “For God so loved that world that he gave his only son, so that whoever believes in him might not perish but may have eternal life.” What we need to understand though is that this verse is only a small portion of a larger tableau that John has painted in this encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus. We will examine this encounter by looking at its components.

Nicodemus: Nicodemus plays a critical role in the Gospel of John. As we shall see, he is the example of what a “seeker” after truth/light ought to be. His search begins in darkness (representing a lack of understanding about Jesus) yet it is a search which is open to discovering truth/light. Nicodemus begins by acknowledging that Jesus is a God inspired teacher. This allows Jesus to engage in a teachable moment that is a word play in the Greek. Jesus tells Nicodemus that only those who have been born from above/again (the Greek word carries both meanings) can know the truth about Jesus. Nicodemus chooses the meaning of born again (meaning a new physical birth), while Jesus means being born from above (meaning a new spiritual birth), implying that only those whom God chooses can see Jesus as truth/light. Nicodemus is perplexed by this, but as we shall see later in John, it does not stop him from moving toward faith (meaning that God/Spirit is already at work in his life).

The Son of Man: Jesus returns to the image of the Son of Man, again a reference to one like the Son of Man in Daniel (7:13-14) who is a messianic figure. This image is combined with the image of the serpent being lifted up by Moses (Num. 21:9) which is again a motif of salvation in which the people’s lives are saved by looking at the serpent. In these images Jesus not only refers to the cross (being lifted up) but also to the concept that Jesus is the Word made flesh (the one who has come down...and will ultimately be taken back up).

For God so loved the world: What is interesting about the Gospel of John is that it moves from conversation (Jesus speaking to Nicodemus) to theological reflection on those conversations (for God so loved the world), without skipping a beat. This reflection makes clear the purpose of the Word becoming flesh. It also makes clear God’s purpose, to save the world. What is interesting about this reflection is its universal nature. In a world divided by class, ethnicity, and gender, John makes it clear that those distinctions have no bearing on God’s desire for creation. God’s new community based in Jesus is intended to be a radically inclusive community. And not only that, but God’s desire is to save everyone (bring them into this community) so that they might have eternal life. A note, in Judaism of the time, eternal life was a reality that was offered to the righteous (though not all Jews believed this). In Roman society there was eternal life, but it was lived in Sheol, the place of the dead.

Light/darkness: once again we have the metaphors of light and darkness. Those who believe in Jesus (the light), will live appropriate lives whose actions reflect God’s love. Those who dwell in darkness will continue to do evil, because they love it...and they will be judged for their choice. Again, in John, there is no grey, there is only darkness and light...one or the other.

Questions:

1. What do you think Jesus means by being “born again”?
2. How do you understand the words “for God so loved the world”?
3. How do you understand the sense that it is the Spirit who makes Jesus known, yet people have chosen to love darkness more than light?