

Broad Daylight

John 19:38-42

Wayne Eberly

August 28, 2016

The gospel of John begins with gripping images of light. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” This light that shines in the darkness is the Word of God that became flesh and dwelt among us. One of the key themes is the response of human beings to this light that shines in the darkness.

Already by the tenth verse of the gospel we read, “He (the light of the world, Jesus Christ) was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.” One of the great mysteries of the incarnation of Jesus Christ is, “He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.” (John 1:10-11) Throughout the gospel we will find time and time again encounters with Jesus where people do not recognize him as the light of the world, the light that shines in the darkness. The ultimate outcome of the one who came to his own and his own received him not is that Jesus was rejected, convicted, sentenced to death, and that he suffered and died on the cross.

Thankfully, there are others who do receive him. There are ones who encounter the true light that comes from the Father full of grace and truth and they receive him as the Son of God, as the Savior of the World. And about these ones we read, “Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.” (John 1:12-13)

In seminary we studied a book about evangelism, about how people hear and respond to the good news, about how the light shines in the darkness and the response of people to that light. One of the biblical figures we looked at was the Apostle Paul. Paul was vehemently opposed to the Christian faith. He persecuted followers of Jesus. In terms of light and darkness he was enveloped in the darkness. And then one day a light from heaven flashed and his life was changed forever. “I saw the light, I saw the light, no more darkness, no more light...praise the Lord. I saw the light!” Boom! Instantaneously! Immediately! The light shined in the darkness and Paul’s life was changed forever.

Indeed, there are some examples in the gospel of John that resonate with that instant and immediate change. Jesus meets a woman at a well, a Samaritan woman, and by the time the two of them have had a rather enlightening conversation, she has seen the light. She rushes back to her village and tells everyone about Jesus. A man who has been blind from birth meets Jesus, receives his sight, and testifies to the religious leaders who are pretty much the embodiment of those who walk in the darkness that he now knows one thing. “I was blind but now I see.” And when Jesus asks the man who was once blind if he believes, he responds with heartfelt faith. “Lord, I believe”, and then he worships Jesus.

But the religious leaders embody another response found in the gospel of John, the response of those who see Jesus do works of healing and supernatural miracles and yet no matter how much light shines, the darkness refuses to believe. He comes to that which is his own, but his own do not receive him. Chapter seven in John ends with the chief priests and Pharisees accusing everyone who believes in Jesus of being deceived. They say those who have believed in him are just a mob that knows nothing of the Jewish law.

Somewhere between this instantaneous and immediate belief in Jesus of those who see the light and know right away that he is Savior of the world, and this stubborn disbelief that will not be enlightened no matter what they see or what Jesus does, there is a more gradual awakening to the light.

The book we studied about evangelism back in seminary was titled *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve*. The author, Richard Peace, names the dramatic, instantaneous conversion that Paul and others might experience as Encounter Evangelism. But that is not the only form of evangelism, and so using the disciples as we find them in the gospel of Mark, Peace also examines what he calls Process Evangelism. When Peace moves from Paul to the twelve disciples, specifically looking at their experience in Mark’s gospel in light of conversion, he comes to the conclusion that the conversion they experienced was equally valid, but happened at a much slower pace than Paul’s. For Paul, conversion was an event. For the disciples, conversion was a process. In terms of the image of light, sometimes faith appears as a bolt of lightning, a bright light that suddenly appears in our life and transforms us immediately. And other times the light comes on slowly, gradually, not through just one experience but through many, until finally we arrive at the point of recognizing that Jesus is the light of the world.

This morning we have before us a passage that comes near the conclusion of the gospel of John. Jesus has died and two men take his dead body, prepare it for burial with a mixture of myrrh and aloes, wrap the body in strips of linen, and then they lay the dead body of Jesus in a garden tomb that is near the place where Jesus was crucified. One of the men is named Joseph of Arimathea. Joseph of Arimathea is mentioned in all four of the gospels, in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and here in John. Each time he plays the same role, taking the body of Jesus and preparing it for burial.

In the gospel of John, Joseph of Arimathea is not alone. A man named Nicodemus is with him. Unlike Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus is not mentioned in the other gospels. It is only in John that we are told Nicodemus was with Joseph of Arimathea as they prepared the body of Jesus for burial. But for those who read the whole gospel of John, you realize this scene of burial is not the first time we have met Nicodemus. His journey is most interesting, especially in terms of darkness and light. Using the terms from the evangelism class I was in, the experience of Nicodemus was definitely not one of Encounter Evangelism. There was no sudden and dramatic conversion. For Nicodemus, it was without a doubt a process, a process that seems to have taken several years.

We first meet Nicodemus in the gospel of John in chapter three. John 3 is where we find one of the best known and deeply loved passages of scripture in the whole bible. It is in John 3:16 that Jesus says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Beloved Son, that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish but have eternal life." That verse alone has turned the light on for countless people in the 2,000 years since Jesus first spoke those words. But for the man to whom Jesus said the words, the light did not come on. At least not at that point. At least not in the full brilliance of light where a person would recognize that Jesus is God's Beloved Son who was sent to save this world. No, the man who heard these words for the first time was literally in the dark.

"Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night..." (John 3:1) Why at night? The implication is he wants to keep his visit a secret. This is a covert operation. If the other religious leaders, and make note of this, John tells us Nicodemus was a man of the Pharisees, if the other religious leaders found out Nicodemus was trafficking with Jesus, he would face a severe reprimand. To avoid this, Nicodemus comes at night. He doesn't come full of faith, rather he comes full of questions.

How many of us come to God, come to Jesus, and we have questions? We might not consider ourselves in the dark, but we certainly haven't seen the light. And so we come, perhaps furtively, perhaps secretly, testing the waters, seeking some answers, hoping for insight. How many of us are like Nicodemus? And when we come by cover of night, we don't necessarily make sense of it all at once. Nicodemus didn't. Here he is in the very presence of Jesus, the Word of God who was with God in the beginning and through whom all things were made, the Word of God who became flesh, Nicodemus was right there with Jesus, and Jesus was talking about John 3:16 and God's love for the world, and maybe there was a spark, maybe a little flame was lit, but lightning didn't seem to strike. He came by night and he left by night.

But he did come. And we find out in John that he comes again. Actually, he doesn't come to Jesus again, but he appears a second time at the end of John 7. The Pharisees are continuing to question who Jesus is, continuing to harangue anyone who follows him or believes his claims. They sent temple guards to arrest Jesus, and the guards came back empty handed. Apparently Jesus impressed them. Why were they empty handed, the religious leaders wanted to know. We sent you to arrest this man named Jesus. Their answer is wonderful. "No one ever spoke the way this man does." They went to arrest him and instead his words arrested them, caused them to reflect, to think, and they left him alone, deeply impressed with Jesus was.

This sets the religious leaders off. "You mean he has deceived you also? Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him? No! But this mob (that is following him) that knows nothing of the law—there is a curse on them." It is obvious one of their defenses against Jesus is the fact that not one religious leader, not one Pharisee has believed in him.

It is at this point a surprising figure speaks up. His name is Nicodemus. Do you remember that Nicodemus was a Pharisee? Now as the Pharisees make a blanket statement that not one of them has believed in Jesus, Nicodemus speaks up. He asks a question, but in the context of this situation it is a rather bold question. "Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?" Apparently Nicodemus thinks Jesus deserves a hearing, a fair hearing. Apparently Nicodemus believes Jesus has something to say. And you can almost believe that the words Jesus said on that dark night have shined a light into the heart of this Pharisee named Nicodemus. Well, his words don't win any favor that day and he is roundly criticized for even suggesting Jesus deserves a fair hearing. But Nicodemus has spoken up. The process of conversion seems to be taking place in his life and in his heart. The light is beginning to shine into the darkness, and the promise of scripture is that the darkness cannot overcome the light.

All of this now brings us to John chapter 19, the third time we meet Nicodemus. Jesus has just died on the cross. God really did give his only Son for this world, and that gift really did show the fullness of God's love, as in a powerful and yet mysterious way the death of Jesus brought salvation for this whole world. Here in John 19 Jesus is dead, and Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus take his dead body, anoint it with spices, wrap it in strips of linen, and place it in the tomb that is in the garden near when Jesus died. When John tells us Nicodemus is there to help bury Jesus, he reminds us of who Nicodemus is. He was the man who earlier visited Jesus at night. Years ago Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, under the cover of darkness.

In *The Message*, which is a contemporary rendering of the Bible from original languages (the words used on the inside cover), Eugene Peterson renders this story of Joseph and Nicodemus in language that truly warms the heart. In *The Message* we read about Joseph of Arimathea asking Pilate for the body of Jesus and about Pilate agreeing. So Joseph comes and takes the body. Then we come to the part about Nicodemus. Listen to how *The Message* renders this beautiful story. "Nicodemus, who had first come to Jesus at night, came now in broad daylight..." Nicodemus comes in broad daylight. He once came under shadow of night. Later he stepped out and spoke up for Jesus. Now, even though Jesus has died, Nicodemus comes, he steps forward, in broad daylight. Even before Jesus is raised from the dead, Nicodemus comes in broad daylight. We can just imagine how broad the daylight will be when on the third day Jesus rises from the dead, triumphant and exalted. But even now, before the miracle of the resurrection, Nicodemus is there. He is there in broad daylight.

A pastor sat with a man one day in a coffee shop. He took a napkin and a pen and wrote two words. On one side of the napkin he wrote the man's name, Dave. On the other side of the napkin he wrote another name. That other name was God. Then he said to Dave, "Between us and God there is a gulf. We are separated from God. Sin is the thing that separates us from God. Sin is what separates every human being from God. The Bible says that sin separates us from God, and it also tells us that everyone has sinned. We are all separated from God by our sin."

Then where that gulf was, that gulf separating humans from God, he drew a bridge. It was just a line connecting God and humans. But then he added another line, so that the bridge took the shape of a cross. Then the pastor said to Dave, "God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross, to forgive our sins. By the death and resurrection of Jesus, God made a bridge for us." On a napkin in a coffee shop the pastor was sharing the good news of the gospel with Dave. He wasn't pointing a finger of condemnation at Dave. He was pointing at the cross of Christ and saying, "He is the way of salvation." Thinking of Nicodemus he might have said on one side of the gulf is darkness and on the other side is light.

The story of Dave is a pretty neat story. Bill Hybels, pastor of the Willow Creek Church was telling the story. Apparently years ago Bill Hybels was suffering burnout and his therapist asked what he did outside church. Bill said, "I don't have a life outside of church." The therapist asked, "What do you do for fun? What do you like to do?" Fun? Now that was a novel idea. Then Bill remembered sailing with his dad when he was young. That had been fun. So the therapist said, "Why don't you take up sailing."

Since the idea was to build a life outside of church, he decided to put an ad in the paper and get a crew together. The guys who signed up were definitely not from church. Hybels said they were a salty bunch. He said they told the crudest jokes, jokes you could not repeat in church, or even in mixed company. And then with an embarrassed smile Bill Hybels said, "But man those jokes were funny." And right in the middle of the salty crew was a guy named Dave. So full of life everyone called him "Super Dave." Dave was full of life, but he was far from faith. Dave was on a path of pleasure, and he didn't have any need for God.

Hybels tells a story that covered six years. At the beginning, he and Dave established a friendship. The first major breakthrough came when Dave got married. He asked Bill to perform the ceremony. Hybels said he has never officiated at a service quite like the one for Super Dave. But it was good to be present with him at such a momentous occasion. Later, Dave's wife became a Christian. This threw Dave for a loop. What was she doing taking this religion stuff seriously?

One day, Bill Hybels sat down with Dave at a coffee shop and shared with him about Jesus Christ. He used an old and trusted illustration. There is a wide gulf separating God from human beings. Writing on a napkin, he drew God on one side of a canyon and humans on the other. He told Dave that God had provided a bridge, a way for us to come to God, and overcome the sin that separates us from God. He drew in a cross, which formed a bridge. Looking intently at Dave, Bill Hybels asked him, "Dave, where are you in this illustration? Are you about to put your foot on the bridge? Are you a few steps away? Where are you, man?" Dave said, "Pastor, I'm not even close to the bridge. I'm over there, three booths away." Bill Hybels said his heart sank. All this friendship and work, and Dave was not even close. Then Dave said, "But if it makes you feel any better, a year ago I was two blocks away."

Several years passed, and Christmas rolled around. That Christmas Eve, Dave and his wife attended services with the Hybels. They came to their house after the service. As he was leaving, Dave said to his pastor, Bill Hybels, "I'm in." Hybels said, "What do you mean?" Dave said, "I'm good to go." Again, Hybels hesitated. Finally, Dave said, "I turned my life over to Christ. I'm in." And they embraced and celebrated the new life that had filled Dave.

Later, when it came time for Dave to be baptized, all of the theology of baptism had been studied and explained. However, Dave was still uncertain about the logistics. He said to Bill Hybels, "How do we do the baptism?" Jokingly, Hybels said, "The deeper the sin, the deeper the dunk." Dave, thinking he was serious, said, "You'd better take me all the way down."

As Bill Hybels finished telling the story of Super Dave, he showed us a video. It was a video of those who were baptized at his church not long after that Christmas Eve service. They were gathered at a lake. As he began the video, he said, "Try to guess which one is Dave." The video was beautiful. The faces of men and women as they came up, spewing water and radiant with God's love was enough to bring tears to any person. Late in the video, Bill Hybels takes a man and immerses him ... and takes him down, lower and lower, all the way down. Then he lifts him up. It's Dave. Dave rises from the water with his arms raised and a shout of praise.

I saw that video nearly twenty years ago, and my memory of it is fuzzy. I don't remember if it was an overcast day. I don't know if there were just a few clouds. I don't know if it was in the midst of a gloomy and dark day, or right in the midst of a thunderstorm. All I know is that when Dave rose from the water, it was broad daylight. To all who receive Jesus, he gives the right to become children of God—children who are born not of natural descent, not of human decision or even a husband's will...no, none of these things. No, those who come to God through Jesus Christ are children of God. And the darkness is all gone. The darkness tried to overcome the light but it couldn't be done. That battle has been won. The darkness is gone, and it is broad daylight. Hallelujah! Thanks be to God!