

LEARNING TO WALK IN THE DARK

Who's Afraid of the Light?

John 3:14-21

March 16, 2025

When I was twelve years old, I got my first job. Once a week, on Saturday mornings, my dad would drive me to Bruce and Dee Wolff's house where I would spend the next ninety minutes with the push lawnmower, the weed eater, and the leaf blower. And every Sunday morning, Bruce Wolff would find me at church and present me with a crisp twenty-dollar bill. It was a big yard. After I got the job, for months, I saved those craps twenties for something my parents had steadfastly refused to buy me. The object of my desires was a thirteen-inch Magnavox television. Now I understand that some of you have screens larger than that in your cars, and by the looks of it, some of your devices are larger than that as well. But this Magnavox television had a remote control, and I was in charge. Best of all, most importantly, I would get to keep the television and the remote in my room. After all, the tv was *mine*, bought with *my* money. *My* room.

Well, not exactly *my* room. You see, my brother Josh is six years younger, and from the time he left his crib until the day I left for college, he was my roommate. He had the bottom bunk, and I had the top. I'm not sure exactly when it started, but Josh and I had a nightly ritual. As soon as the lights were out, one of us would speak into the darkness, "Hey, you still awake?" The other would answer, and we would talk until sleep overcame us.

Now, to be clear, and in my defense, six-year-old Josh was as excited about the tv as I was. I got to choose the shows, of course. Remember: *my* tv. But he got to watch. Our new routine involved the light of the screen and a thirty-minute sleep timer. And with that, our nightly conversations ended, our voices replaced by the sound of silly sitcoms. Looking back now, it's one of my deep regrets. I wish I could return to the day before I bought the tv and reclaim that time with my little brother. Yes, my new purchase provided bright light, but it stole something far more valuable.

Now, three decades later, the glow of screens aims to replace something essential in all our lives. Light boxes of every size and shape are always within our reach, promising connection. Their siren song is impossible to ignore. Last Sunday after worship, one of you told me that you were attempting to practice digital sabbath, and so had decided to take evening walks without your phone in hand, and got from your front door to the sidewalk in front of your house before panic set in. *Where is it?*

I do wonder. Is the light they provide anything more than empty calories?

This Lent at Second Church, we are learning to walk in the dark, looking to our own experience and the witness of scripture that might suggest that darkness and quiet have something meaningful to teach us in an age saturated in light and drowned in sound. It is, to say the least, a countercultural assertion. After all, most of us are taught to associate darkness with fear, treat silence with suspicion. Could we open our hearts to the possibility that instead they offer space for growth, for encountering God?

Nicodemus, a recognized religious leader, comes to Jesus under the cover of darkness. Perhaps he fears backlash if others discover him meeting with this controversial preacher and healer. Or maybe, well, some conversations need to happen at night. Nicodemus is searching for truth. He needs to share what is on his heart. *Hey, Jesus, are you still awake?* He has a yearning for human connection with its divine source, and it is the darkness that makes this possible.

Nicodemus needs a place to ask the hard questions, the vulnerable questions. He finds Jesus at night, and he asks. Jesus answers, but he takes his conversation partner deeper into the mystery of faith so that, finally, the Pharisee asks in wonder, "How can these things be?"

"For God so loved the world..." This iconic verse appears in the middle of their encounter, and context matters here. As beautifully descriptive and profoundly true as these words are, I do worry about the weight they have been asked to carry for our faith. I worry about the way that this verse is lifted from the story that provides its context and gives it meaning. I worry that these words, originally intended as an expression of the depth of God's love, have been shaped instead into a weapon of judgment or a test of doctrine.

Nicodemus is asking big questions. He seeks Jesus out by night, and what he receives is not an answer but an invitation into a truth that is deeper than certainty. Jesus describes the basis for divine judgment—that the light has come into the world, and we have preferred the darkness. Here Jesus makes an important distinction for his nocturnal interlocuter: not all darkness is the same. There is darkness that conceals, and there is darkness that reveals. In the dark, we can bury our heads and avoid truth. Or, in the dark, we can embrace mystery beyond our understanding. Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night—not to hide, but to seek.

What Jesus offers is a redefinition of judgment. We think of judgment as punishment—consequences fit the crime. As a kid, a group of us, following worship, we would rush into the fellowship hall immediately after the benediction and begin our weekly game of dodgeball. Let's say that things would sometimes get a little intense, that lots of kids are playing and lots of dodge balls being thrown all over that large room. And let's say that one time, a ball was thrown (that's passive voice... It was thrown by me) and hit a window in the fellowship hall, with enough velocity to shatter the glass. And let's just say that at precisely that moment, an elder of the church appeared in the doorway of the fellowship hall. Judgment ensued.

That's the way we think of judgment. Getting caught, facing consequences. But Jesus offers a different definition. Judgment here is not about punishment; it is about truth. His words are not punitive, they are descriptive. Their goal is not condemnation but redemption. Light has come into the world, and we have been afraid of it. And so, we have created our own sources of artificial light, and we have

called them good. We have been distracted and deluded. But the true light has not gone away; God sent the Son into the world not to condemn but to save.

It seems to me, this is an even harder truth for us to accept. We totally get judgment as punishment. If we're honest, we even delight in it. It satisfies our need for clarity and fairness to see someone else get his or her just deserts. We are comfortable with such a response. But grace? Much more difficult for us. This is why there is nothing more scandalous than the cross—it demonstrates the radical love of Jesus Christ, who came not to condemn but to save.

For God so loved (*so loved!*) this world that God's answer to our brokenness was not measured or cautious or even particularly fair. God deems this world worth saving. God loved the world so much that God gave what mattered most. God's unconditional love and unmerited grace ought to hold in check all our tendencies to judge and condemn others. I want to say that again. God's unconditional love and unmerited grace ought to hold in check all our tendencies to judge and condemn others. In other words, we would do well to include John 3:17 whenever we recite the preceding verse. *God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world.* The life of Jesus Christ, his ministry, and his death and resurrection are not about condemnation. They are an invitation to abundant life. And, friends, if *Jesus Christ* did not come to condemn the world, that's probably not your role either.

You see, Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a righteous man, a faithful man, a religious leader. He knew all about scripture. He had the answers. Quote them, chapter and verse. Jesus pushes him beyond knowledge justifying judgement into spiritual transformation that delights in mystery.

I don't know about you, but it is easy for me to spiral into a kind of torrent of judgment. It doesn't feel particularly good, but the truth is, once I start it's hard to stop. I look at other drivers on the road, other diners in the restaurant, other fans at the game, or the posts of others on social media, and get in this judgmental frame of mind. I don't know for sure, but I have heard it can even happen in the church—judging the worship behavior of another, the choices or convictions of fellow followers of Jesus. It doesn't feel particularly good, but

it can be hard to stop the spiral of judgment even as it takes us farther and farther from a centered spirit of worship. *Can you believe he wore that? How could they let their children behave that way? Did you hear what she said? I would never.* Judgment, judgment, judgment. And can I say, all rooted in an underlying self-judgment that says I am not good enough, I am not wise enough, I am not faithful enough. Isn't it exhausting, all this judging and being judged?

The invitation offered by Jesus this morning is simple and transformative. Let it go. Release your need to evaluate and adjudicate the worthiness of everybody else. Perhaps most radically, silence your ceaseless self-judgment, only amplified and distributed by the devices and platforms that monetize our attention and drive our dissatisfaction. Let the inclusive love of Jesus Christ quiet your condemnation.

For many years, the poet and farmer Wendell Berry spent his Sunday mornings walking the fields around his Kentucky home. The result was a wonderful book of Sabbath Poems, which includes this brief verse that I love:

*Best of any song
is bird song
in the quiet, but first
you must have the quiet.*

Two Saturdays ago. Our boys' basketball seasons had unfortunately ended. The weather was not yet warm. Nothing was on the calendar, and by mid-afternoon, we were out of ideas and needed to get out of the house. Sara suggested the community center pool. Great idea! The boys could play in the water, and I could mindlessly doomscroll on my phone. It was going precisely as planned (meaning I was diving deeper and deeper into despair and judgement. How could they post that? Why would they think that? Their pictures look better than mine.) until—shock and horror—the low battery light. Now for a brief moment, I thought I would make it if I modulated my activity. But I'm not proud to say I couldn't stop. And then, just like that, screen dark. Notifications silenced. Scrolling ceased. I looked up. I took my airpods out. And gradually my attention shifted.

Here is what I saw. Kids playing football in the pool. A proud new dad helping his infant daughter down the tiny

kids' slide. Here is what I heard. Laughter. The squeals of children run-walking around the pool. Here is what I did. I jumped in. About an hour later as we walked out, a kid looked up at me and said, "Hey, you're that pastor guy. See you at church tomorrow!"

Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night, full of questions. This is not the last time we will meet him in John's Gospel. He will be there, at the foot of the cross. The one who sought answers, embracing mystery. The one who came in fear, now in awe of God's costly love. You see, judgment is not about getting caught. It's about being found. Not condemnation, but revelation.

First you must have the quiet. Then you will hear the promise. First you must welcome the darkness. Then you will see the light. Amen.