

John 3: 14-21

4th Lent

14 MAR 21

R.C. Brown

Children of the Light

True to my coming of age in the late 1950's and early 1960's, I really enjoy a drive in the country. For me at least, nothing beats the pure pleasure of driving. But, since this is not the most responsible environmental practice, I have tried to do the right thing, and to limit my trips to the necessary, for the most part. Naturally, when Jill and I recently had to go to Little Rock on business, I was not displeased.

Since the legislature, in its infinite wisdom, has seen fit to up the speed limit to 75 on the interstate highways, we have observed a noted speed up in the traffic on I-40. There seems to be more reckless behavior of those behind the wheel, and tailgating has become the new fashion, no matter how fast you are driving.

On that recent trip, I attempted to drive the speed limit, and set my cruise control on 75. In the rear-view mirror, I could see that some distance behind me there was a very large pickup truck weaving in and out of traffic. I was approaching an 18-wheeler in my lane, so I pulled ahead into the left lane to pass. I won't disclose how fast I was driving during this maneuver, but it was well above 75. Before I could complete the pass and pull into the right lane, the large pickup was on my rear, following very, very closely, dangerously closely, in fact. This was the very definition of tailgating.

As I remarked to Jill about the fine Christian example this person was setting by endangering our lives, as well as his own, and that of the other people on the road, I pulled into the right lane and he finally got around me. That's when I saw it. The large, yellow bumper sticker attached to the rear window of the pickup. Emblazoned on the sticker was "JOHN 3:16"

In our time, we have seen this on billboards, on posters at ball games, on coffee cups, on bumper stickers, and in dozens and dozens of other public places. Our evangelical brothers and sisters have made this a mantra on public display—and rightly so!

Perhaps John 3:16 is the most famous and recognizable scripture of the current era. After all, it expresses, in the words of Jesus Himself, his purpose and mission, and the intention of God for sending his beloved son into this world.

But our gospel lesson this morning is much, much more than verse 16. The theme here is the love that God has for his creation and all of humanity. When we look to Jesus, and acknowledge our wrongdoing and sin, we receive the Kingdom.

This passage comes at the end of a conversation Jesus had with Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a believer in Jesus. By this point in the conversation, only Jesus is speaking, and he admonishes Nicodemus on his lack of knowledge of the ancient scriptures. This lecture by Jesus contains both condemnation and salvation, belief and unbelief, doing evil and doing good, and, in a reference to the ancient texts, darkness and light.

When Jesus refers to Moses and the serpent, a passage we heard moments ago, there is a play on words that we do not get in English. The verb used for lift can mean literally to lift, as Jesus will be lifted on the cross, and it also can mean "lifted up", as Jesus will be resurrected and lifted up to heaven.

There is an element of condemnation and punishment for the children of Israel and the serpents, as God sent the snakes to punish the unfaithful and complaining Israelites. But, to look upon the lifted-up image of the snake raised up by Moses, was to receive salvation from its bite.

The allusion here to Jesus is quite obvious. But, and this is very important, Jesus declares that in contrast to the snake in the desert, God did not send him for condemnation of the world, but that through him all of creation might be reconciled to God. To us believers, that is salvation and eternal life.

Now, the Old Testament uses the illustration of darkness and light over and over again. Of course, evil is represented by darkness, and good and righteousness is represented by light.

For example, in Psalm 27, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?"

In Proverbs 4, "The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn"

In Isaiah 9, referring to Jesus, who is to come, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light."

Jesus further says that belief in him, what we call faith, is the key to our salvation. Those who do not have faith are condemned already, not by Jesus, but by their own unbelief. The mission of Jesus is to save, and to bring light and life to humanity.

And that faith and belief are signified by a walk toward the light. When we have good intentions, when our hearts are pure, when we have that all-consuming faith and belief in Jesus, we walk toward the light.

But, when our hearts are characterized by unbelief and lack of faith in Jesus, we walk toward the darkness. The evil in those who manifest unbelief naturally seeks the darkness, where that evil may abound.

To receive this gift of light and life, we must look to Jesus.

Just as the ancient Israelites in the desert had to look upon the image of the serpent, we must look to Jesus to receive the light. Just as the ancients had to acknowledge their sins when they looked upon the serpent, we must acknowledge and confess our sins when we look upon the light of Jesus.

But the light drives some away. Some do not confess their sins and shortcomings and their human imperfections. In this way, they confirm their place among the dead.

Humanity must confess their imperfections when they look at the light of Jesus. Jesus can lead us to light and life, and to the overwhelming love of God the Father.

Let us be children of the light. Let us walk toward the light and life offered by Jesus.

