

The Wisdom of End Zone Evangelists

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(Holding up the John 3:16 sign)

Have you ever seen one of these signs before?

There always seems to be one lone (sometimes shirtless) evangelist in the end zone who feels compelled to take his 5 seconds of fame to speak the Word of God to the viewing audience.

John 3:16 - "For God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but have eternal life."

If we were hard-pressed, most of us could recite at least part of that well-known passage (some say the best-known passage).... and honestly, if I had only one shot at it it's not a bad one to pick to communicate the glory... and the wonder... and the power of God's embodied love.

However, the NEXT line is the one that speaks to my soul... and what the end zone evangelists often leave out. But remember, scripture wasn't initially divided into chapters and verses like it is known to us.

Listen to John 3:17 - "Indeed God did not send the Son into the world to CONDEMN the world, but in order that the world might be SAVED through Him."

Now, that is some good news.

For all of our shortcomings and despite our flaws the aim of God is to SAVE us. It makes me wonder how so many messages of condemnation have gotten into our cultural and religious landscapes. Is that really about God or is that more about how we feel about ourselves and others?

Although not directly mentioned in the reading, this portion of John's Gospel is where we see Jesus talking with Nicodemus. Despite being a religious leader, I don't think Nicodemus came to talk about official business. My sense is that he came for more personal reasons. Jesus sparked something inside of Nicodemus, and he came to see for himself.

Who was this person who turned water into wine and flipped the tables of the moneychangers to cleanse the temple? Could Jesus be the one they had been waiting for?

Jesus appreciated that Nicodemus was a pharisee so he utilized their common reference point of the Hebrew scripture. Jesus drew on the archetype of snakes and also spoke of God's unending love. I will stay away from the snakes, but I will run headlong into the reality of God's unending love. (Well, I will touch on snakes just long

enough to name that the world can be a dangerous place... but that danger is not as powerful as God's presence working in the world.)

Nicodemus isn't really all that different from Thomas - Let me come into the presence of Jesus so that I might see and know. He might not be all that different from us as we seek a deeper assurance of the meaning of Jesus in OUR lives. How often have we asked to know the mind of God.

What was Jesus's message? Entering the Kingdom of God meant something must change. We must first die in some way in order to be born again. To be made new. What some translations call "born from above."

The German theologian and priest, Martin Luther, called this part of John "the Gospel in miniature." What we believe is all there, summed up in just a few lines. Luther also wrote that even though people hear the word of God, it doesn't always sink in... "and therefore we must slay reason and experience new life."

Slay our reason?

Luther asks us to put to death our rational minds. This is not easy work in a culture that tells us our mind is our best tool and greatest gift.

Slay dragons, yes.

Slay injustice, absolutely.

But the thought of slaying ourselves?

The newness that is required may not make sense and can't be fully understood, but it is necessary if we trust in the one who created us and seeks to continually redeem and sustain us. Trusting in the God who loves us so dearly and so completely that God will try to reach us any way that God can - wind, water, flame, the witness of others, and even a Son - the presence of God with skin and heart and a holy breath, for us... and with us.

With that assurance how can we respond any other way but to turn and live?

Did Nicodemus use the cloak of darkness to save face or avoid the crowds? Did the gospel writer use darkness as a literary device to highlight how those in darkness are seeking the light of Christ? I'm not sure, but I do know that darkness is the perfect place to make space for the unknown.

In my house, bedtime rituals really matter. We run in different directions all day, but when the darkness comes we settle down and into the quiet space that only contains us and God. It is the darkness of our bedrooms that allows us to open. We share stories of our day. Together we lament ... we rejoice... we give thanks... And maybe even are brave enough to wonder and hope. It is the space where even my teenager unlearns their anxious nature and allows mom just simply to snuggle with them.

Darkness is an invitation.

Darkness is a door.

I believe that Nicodemus was coming, not to disprove, but to ask
the questions that can best be wrestled with in darkness.

What do I believe?

What does it mean and if I get close to it, what will be waiting there?

WHO will be waiting there?

What in me leans toward darkness instead of light?

Nicodemus asked, "How?" and Jesus responded, "Let me tell you."

Nicodemus didn't understand, and Jesus tried again because Jesus did not let go of
Nicodemus... and won't let go of us either...

What in you might be asking, "How?"

What in you is seeking to be reborn?

To undergo a holy midwifery of the soul?

How might the darkness no longer serve you?

What places in you are parched... feeling desert-like... and just longing for living water?

How might you turn your face to the winds of the Holy Spirit that are
already blowing in and through your life?

John is the only writer to capture this exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus because John's Gospel is more interested in communicating WHO Jesus IS instead of WHAT Jesus DOES.

It's Lent, so having the cross on our minds is natural. Just two weeks ago, Mark's gospel encouraged us to take up our cross and follow Jesus. John sees it a little differently. The Gospel of John actually calls us to take up the NATURE of Christ and LIVE. To embody light is a choice. A choice we make every. single. day.

The first congregation I served was in Darien, Connecticut. It was a bedroom community for Wall Street and Madison Ave. The people who filled whose pews made decisions that we all across the country. One dad, who faithfully taught Sunday School once told me that his work led to such dark places that all he could do was doddle a candle in the margin of his notepad and silently sing "this little light of mine" to get him through some meetings. The thought of the sweet voices of the children in the children's chapel was the soundtrack to keeping him grounded in a context that didn't make sense or speak of God's love or justice.

Depending on where you find yourself this Lent it might be just a slight shift in perspective or maybe you have a need... and a desire... and a longing to make a drastic turn.

Like I have said before - There is no shame in wherever you find yourself. There is no shame.

Let us allow the rest of the Lenten season to be a space where we choose to turn towards Jesus so that we can feel and know the unmistakable overlap of our belovedness and the greatness of God.

The good news has been given to us in Scripture... and notebook doodles... and in end zone messages. It is all around us.

God loves.

God redeems.

God is everlasting.

Let the darkness of Lent be a door and not a gate.

Let it be an invitation to release your need to reason your way into faith and simply give yourself over to trust.

Slay yourself.

To know God IS the meaning of everlasting life.

This invitation to know God in the person of Jesus is universal.

It is for all of us.

But just in case we have let the noise of our lives get in the way, I will remind us -

Turn.

Believe.

and you will be born anew. Amen.