

“Recovery”

Rehab series.¹ 4th Sunday in Lent

John 3:1-21

Welcome, Prayer.

I got my first pair of glasses in the ninth grade. Up until then, I hadn't really known that I needed them. I would walk with my head down in the hallways, only focused on things within my short-range vision. Then one day I had to walk to the front of my geometry class to read the problem on the overhead screen. My teacher advised me to go see the optometrist. Sure enough, I got my first pair of vintage 90's glasses with the big lenses. The transformation was amazing! It was like I had recovered my eyesight. There were so many things I could see – walking down the hallway, I picked up my head; I could see the end of the hall and the water stains on the ceiling; I could even recognize my friends walking towards me. Everything was crystal clear, like a spotlight was shining on it.

In the past few weeks, we have been talking about how Lent is like Rehab for Christians, a time for us to refocus on God. In these forty days of intentional reflection we can bare ourselves before God, sometimes with painful confessions and realizations of how weak and broken we are. We bring the dark parts of our souls into the light of Jesus, to regain our heavenly eyesight and prepare for Easter.

I think most of us would agree today that our world seems filled with darkness and spiritual blindness. It is impossible to read the news without seeing some tragic story of failure or moral evil. It's not that we never hear good news; it just seems that the bad news is overwhelming, like a thundercloud that blocks out the sun. In the face of this darkness, we seek to recover the light.

We are not alone in our search. The best movies tell of the battles between Darkness and Light. But church, let me tell you, not even George Lucas was the first one to identify this battle. Almost 2,000 years ago, in first chapter of the Gospel of John, the author wrote: “In him (Jesus) was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” (John 1:4-5)

¹ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/lent-2018-worship-planning-series>

Light and Darkness, Good and Evil. The reason books, movies, and even news broadcasts are so popular is we are all engaged in this conflict. We want the Light to win. We want a renewed vision, a different prescription, the recovery of our spiritual vision; and in the Gospel of John, we learn how to find them.

Chapter three is a record of a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, a Pharisee and teacher of the Jews, who was looking for some answers. It takes place in the darkness of night. The conversation starts out great: Nicodemus compliments Jesus, calling him a “teacher from God” and noting that Jesus performs miracles or “signs” that really prove who he is. Nicodemus probably was about to ask his question when Jesus offers this statement:

John 3:3 - “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

The Greek word for “again” in this passage can also mean “from above.” There is an intentional double-meaning here. Jesus is talking about heavenly things, but Nicodemus takes it to mean earthly things. In fact, he tells Jesus, it is impossible to literally be born a second time.

Jesus describes how one sees the kingdom of God. Being born again is the prescription to see God’s kingdom. That’s a good thing. We want to see the kingdom of heaven. Nicodemus does, too, so he asks Jesus to explain himself further. (John 3:9)

Jesus launches into a sermon about light and darkness, good and evil. He makes an obscure reference to Numbers 21, about Moses lifting up a snake. That’s not a common story, so allow me to read the passage in Numbers 21:4-9. *4They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; 5they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!”*

6Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. 7The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people.

8The LORD said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." 9So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.

Israel was going through rehab, 40-years in the wilderness, and many times, their vision was obscured. In fact, this story was the fourth time that Israel had rebelled against God. They were grumbling; they were complaining, just like people in our world today.

So God sent snakes to punish the Israelites, who came running back to Moses. They made their confession in a hurry: “We screwed up! Please save us!” And God told Moses to make a bronze snake, put it on a pole, and have the Israelites “lift up” their gaze to it and be healed.

That phrase, “lift up,” is where Jesus makes the connection. When the Israelites lifted up their gaze and reset their vision, they found healing and recovery. Jesus tells Nicodemus this is a prophecy concerning himself. The Son of Man will be lifted up and will save those who believe in him, who look to him for help. It’s paradoxical. To be healed and saved, you must lift up your head and gaze at Jesus who died on the cross, despised and broken.

John 3:16 explains how God in Jesus gives us a new prescription. “God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” Perhaps you’ve heard that before. Maybe you have heard it so often, you’ve forgotten how amazing that offer really is.

Let me offer this analogy to describe God’s grace. My three children are here. I love them very much. And as much as I love the rest of you, Church, I would never willingly offer even one of my three children as a sacrifice to save you. I think all the parents listening would agree.

Yet this is the shocking thing: God did offer his own Son. God Incarnate – God in the flesh – the Son of God, Jesus Christ, died for us, removing the darkness of our sin by the light of his life. Romans 5:8 says God did this without our approval or even our awareness: “God proves His love for us in this: while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” That is amazing. We don’t deserve God’s love, but we receive it anyway, a gift offered freely to you, me, and the world.

In the UMC, we teach that grace is the process. It starts with prevenient grace – the understanding that before we are aware, God is already working in our lives. When we confess our sins and trust in Christ alone, we experience justifying grace, understanding we have received forgiveness. But our recovery doesn't stop there. Sanctifying grace, being made holy, is the third step. Our faith is a journey, with many starts and stops, steps forward and backward. God can immediately change us in an altar call, but in my experience, I've more often seen a gradual lightening of someone's soul, coming to Jesus and then beginning to live out their God-given purpose.

Jesus points out plainly that people love the dark. I know this. I used to play a game called “Bloody Murder” – it was a kind of scary hide-and-go-seek – but my friends and I would only play it after dark. Why? It was no fun to play during the day. There were no good places to hide.

Jesus tells us that many of us still love darkness. We harbor our sin in secret. We don't come into the light easily. When we do step into the light of Jesus, we can feel exposed, even condemned. Light always reveals sin. And that is uncomfortable. In the movies, it's OK to cheer for the Darth Vader and all the baddies, but in real life, we don't want to admit that is who we are.

So the good news of John 3:16 is great, however, we need to hear John 3:17 as well. *“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”* When we trust in Christ, we are no longer condemned. Our sin is taken away. To get there, we have to be honest with Jesus. We have to be open. We have to admit, “Jesus, I'm arrogant, prideful, willful, and sinful.” When we finally admit that, we step into the light of grace. We get a new vision. We can begin recovery, our sanctification.

Recovery is not about having all the right answers. We don't have them. You can be saved and still struggle. You can be at the end of your rope, your anxiety can be sky high, your despair can be deep and your heartbreak wide. Recovery is a journey. No matter where we are in our walk, we all need the Light.

There are three different places you may find yourself in this journey from darkness to light. No matter where that is, I wish to say something to you.

First, you might be someone who frankly doesn't believe anything I've said just now. OK. Let me ask, what is your option to overcome the darkness? Where do you find hope? Do you rely on yourself or others? I fear you will be disappointed, because no one is perfect. So I have a simple prayer for you: Ask Jesus to reveal himself to you. Ask him to show you that he is real. Thomas the disciple once made that request. He said, “Unless I see the nail marks in [Jesus'] hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.” (John 20:25) And you know what? Jesus answered him. Thomas experienced recovery of his Jesus-vision. Like Thomas, you can simply pray, “Jesus, please show yourself to me.”

Second, you might be someone who knows the truth of Jesus, but you still live in the darkness of fear and rejection. I experience this every now and then. If that describes you, read John 3:16-17 again, and every time it says “the world,” replace that with your own name. “God so loved ____, that he sent his one and only Son, that if ____ believes in him, ____ will have eternal life. God did not send his Son into the world to condemn ____, but to save ____.” God loves you more than you will ever fully know. Let God restore your vision.

Lastly, you might be someone who loves the Light. You may think, “Hey, pastor, I've been a Christian longer than you've been alive.” Good. I still believe every one of us has some darkness to confess. Lent is an annual season. As we confess, our job is also to reflect the light of Jesus back into the world. A light that is absorbed is no good. However, a light that is reflected illuminates the way for all. That's why I am so serious about these Easter invitations. Take another one. Share it. It does us no good to confess Christ and not share the Light of Love with someone else. If we are serious about calling ourselves disciples of Christ, then we must go when he says, “Go.” We must not hide inside these walls. If we have found recovery, we must share the cure.

Jesus proclaimed he would help the blind recover their sight and preach the good news to the poor. (Luke 4:18) Not just physical blindness, but spiritual blindness, too. May we be a church that helps people recover their God-vision. May we be a church that helps people find hope and light. Together, let's be a church that helps people see Jesus.

Would you pray with me?

Memory Verse: John 3:17 (NIV)

“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

Reflection Questions:

1. How good is your eyesight? How do you feel when you don't have your glasses, or when you are in the dark?
2. Why do you think Nicodemus came to Jesus in the dark? What might he have feared?
3. What do you think about John 3:17, that Jesus did not come into the world to condemn it? Why do people feel condemned?
4. Why do you think people love darkness instead of the light?
5. What do you need to do to confess your darkness?
6. How can you show the light of Jesus to someone else?