

Wesley United Methodist Church

Rev. Beverly E Stenmark

What R U Up 2?

March 11, 2018

Title: Light Up

Scripture: Psalm 107:1-3

John 3:14-21

Today is the fourth Sunday in the Season of Lent – a time of self-reflection; a time of looking carefully and intentionally at our relationship with God and what God is calling us to be and to do. We began Lent by looking at Jesus coming up out of the waters of baptism and the call to us to come up out of the depths of whatever seeks to keep us under and know that we are God’s beloved children. The invitation was to come up and to fully be who we are created to be for the sake of the world.

Coming up, means individually becoming a disciple, a follower of Jesus; “taking up” the causes of Jesus – justice, righteousness and mercy in our day and our world. But we are more than a bunch of individual disciples, we are also the Church of Jesus Christ, the body of Christ in the world today, and we are to rise up and be a holy temple, a holy dwelling place of God in the world.

Today, as we reflect upon probably the best-known verse of the Bible and look at it in its context, we are called to be those who recognize that God did not send Jesus to condemn the world, but to offer it saving light. As believers in that light, we are called to be those who will continue to light up the world through our lives so that the world might see the hope it yearns for.

In the 1970’s holding up a poster that read “John 3:16” on it became a popular way for some Christians to try to spread the Gospel. It became part of the media around sport events. During the 70’s and 80’s, Rollen Stewart became known for wearing a rainbow wig and dancing around at

baseball, basketball, and football events while holding a “John 3:16” sign. His passion and belief that the end of the world was near took over his life. His behavior around this led to bizarre actions and he is currently serving three consecutive life sentences.

In 2009, Tim Tebow decided to profess his faith by wearing eye black with the inscription “John 3:16” on his face. He was excited when he believed that 94 million people googled “John 3:16” during the National Collegiate Championship game. He said, “It was a pretty cool moment.”

Just about a year ago, John 3:16 was in the press again when Aaron Hernandez, the former Patriots player and convicted murderer scrawled “John 3:16” on his forehead before committing suicide. His motivation is unknown, but some believe it may have been a plea for forgiveness.ⁱ

However, it has been seen in the public and in sports events specifically, John 3:16 is probably the best-known verse in the Bible. The writer of this week’s Upper Room Disciplines said we could see it as God’s “calling card” because “it captures the truth about how God wishes to be seen and known through the love of the Son.”ⁱⁱ

“God so loved the world, that He gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” This one sentence is in the middle of a rather profound section of John’s gospel. This takes place in the middle of Jesus responding to a visit from Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. Nicodemus came to Jesus at night so that he would not be seen. He began by saying that he could see that Jesus was a teacher sent by God. Jesus responded by telling Nicodemus, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again.” Then followed a complicated discussion about being born again that leads into today’s Gospel reading.

Jesus essentially explained to Nicodemus that God's ways and understanding are not the same as ours. Because Nicodemus knew his history and scripture, Jesus used an illustration from Jewish history to help explain what would happen to him.

While the Israelites were wandering in the desert for 40 years, they did a lot of complaining about Moses, about God and about their situation. Complaining can blind us to the truth and that's what happened to them. They forgot the truth that God had saved them from slavery in Egypt. Like humanity has done repeatedly throughout all of history, they managed to get themselves in trouble through their words and actions. The book of Numbers tells us in the 21st chapter, that eventually God sent poisonous serpents among the constantly complaining people. When they were bitten by the serpents, people died.

The people then came to Moses and said that they had sinned by speaking against God and against Moses and they asked Moses to pray to God to take the serpents away. God's response was a little different than they hoped for. The complaining had been long and constant, and I suspect that God knew that as soon as the serpents disappeared they would find something to complain about again. Instead of making the serpents go away, Moses was told to make a bronze model of a serpent and put it on a pole. Anyone who was bitten should look up at the serpent on the pole and the person would live. Even in the midst of dealing with their lack of faith and their actions, God provided a way to save them from the consequences of being bitten.

Jesus used this important piece of Jewish history to explain to Nicodemus that even though all of us have been disobedient from time to time, God is the one who has done all the work of reconciliation. "Just as

Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” Jesus was telling Nicodemus that he would be lifted up, he would die but because of this, those who look to him, those who believe will have eternal life. And then comes the verse that we know so well, “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.”

The conversation with Nicodemus didn’t end there. Jesus went on to explain that he had come into the world to bring light rather than darkness. Nicodemus had come to Jesus under the cover of darkness but would learn that he has to respond to Jesus in the light.

We are talking about much more than physical light or darkness here, just as Jesus was talking about something much different than physically being born again. We are talking about darkness as the captivity of concealment, of hiding from the truth, of avoiding what we know is the right thing to do or hiding actions that we know are wrong. The light is the freedom of life in Christ, it is freedom to live in the open, it is knowing that even when we have done something of which we are ashamed, even then God still knows and loves us. It is the freedom of knowing that when we look to Jesus we are forgiven. We do not need to try to hide our actions from God because that is impossible. Choosing life means not choosing hiding from the truth. Jesus says, “Those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.” Jesus comes inviting us to believe and to approach the light of God by doing acts of truth.

Nicodemus appears two times more in John’s Gospel. While he at first came to Jesus at night so that the other Pharisees would not know he

had spoken to Jesus, in the 7th chapter, the Sanhedrin, the ruling council was having a debate about Jesus and how he was deceiving people. Nicodemus spoke up and called for the truth. “Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?” This could not have been easy for Nicodemus to do, and, indeed, it earned him scorn and heckling from his colleagues. Still Nicodemus had learned. He chose the light and spoke truth to power.

Nicodemus appears one more time. Following Jesus’ crucifixion, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea come to prepare Jesus’ body for burial. Joseph of Arimathea donated a tomb for Jesus’ burial, and Nicodemus came with about a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloe, the spices used to prepare the body – a large and expensive amount of spices.

Nicodemus had learned to do what was true; he had decided to come to the light. We, too, are called to come to the light. We, too, are called to do what is true so that it may be seen that what we do has been done in God.

There are many ways that we can bring light into a world that desperately yearns for hope and light. Each Sunday when we bring our offering, we bring gifts to help bring the light and hope to the world. Today, we have a special opportunity to help support the United Methodist Committee on Relief – UMCOR. This Sunday used to be called, “One Great Hour of Sharing” and the special offering for UMCOR is the money that pays for the basic administration and functioning of the United Methodist Committee on Relief. UMCOR is present whenever a natural disaster strikes in the world. UMCOR mission teams are present for years afterwards to help in the rebuilding and response.

When a hurricane, earthquake, tsunami or other disaster occurs, we often take a special offering to help with the response. At that time, I always celebrate that 100% of everything collected goes directly to the disaster relief. That is possible, only because of the offering that is received in churches today, or in the next few weeks, that pays for all of the cost of functioning as a relief agency. UMCOR brings light and hope to many throughout the world, and we are part of that through our offerings following a disaster, but also through our offering today that makes it possible for UMCOR to be ready to respond immediately.

We bring light to the world through so many things that we do, and you have heard me mention some of them at other times. However, we humans are also very good at coming up with lots of reasons why we cannot do something.

I want to share with you part of a short story written by Max Lucado. In his book God Came Near, there is a somewhat funny but pointed story called "Light of the Storage Closet". The story takes place during a power outage in his home. He went to the closet to get candles and found four candles that he thought would do very well. As he lit the candles and prepared to leave the closet with them, he heard a voice that he soon realized came from one of the candles. "Don't take me out of this room." After his initial shock, he responded, "What do you mean? I have to take you out. You're a candle. Your job is to give light. It's dark out there. People are stubbing their toes and walking into walls. You have to come out and light up the place!"

The candle protested, "But you can't take me out, I'm not ready. I need more preparation. ... I've decided I need to research this job of light-giving so I won't go out and make a bunch of mistakes. You'd be surprised

how distorted the glow of an untrained candle can be. So, I'm doing some studying. I just finished a book on wind resistance. I'm in the middle of a great series of tapes on wick build-up and conservation – and I'm reading the new bestseller on flame display. You might like it. It's called *Waxing Eloquently.*”

He responded, that “You're not the only candle on the shelf. I'll blow you out and take the others!” As he prepared to blow out the candle, he heard other voices insisting that they weren't going either. Starting to get angry, he said, “You are candles and your job is to light dark places!”

“Well, that may be what you think' said the candle on the far left – a long, thin fellow with a goatee and a British accent. `You may think we have to go, but I'm busy.' `Busy?' `Yes, I'm meditating. ... I'm meditating on the importance of light. It's really enlightening.”

Lucado continues, “I decided to reason with them. `Listen, I appreciate what you guys are doing. I'm all for meditation time. And everyone needs to study and research; but for goodness' sake, you guys have been in here for weeks! Haven't you had enough time to get your wick on straight? And you other two,' I asked, `are you going to stay in here, as well?’

“A short, fat purple candle with plump cheeks that reminded me of Santa Claus spoke up. `I'm waiting to get my life together. I'm not stable enough. I lose my temper easily. I guess you could say that I'm a hothead.’

“The last candle had a female voice, very pleasant to the ear. `I'd like to help,' she explained, ‘but lighting the darkness is not my gift.’ ... `I'm a singer. I sing to other candles to encourage them to burn more brightly.’

Without asking my permission, she began a rendition of ‘This Little Light of Mine.’ The other three joined in, filling the storage room with singing. ...

“They wouldn’t stop. I put the big candle on the shelf and took a step back and considered the absurdity of it all. Four perfectly healthy candles singing to each other about light but refusing to come out of the closet. I had all I could take. One by one I blew them out. They kept singing to the end. The last one to flicker was the female. I snuffed her out right in the ‘puff’ part of ‘Won’t let Satan puff me out.’

“I stuck my hands in my pocket and walked back out in the darkness. I bumped my knee on the same freezer. Then I bumped into my wife. ‘Where are the candles?’ she asked. ‘They don’t ... they won’t work. Where did you buy those candles anyway?’

“‘Oh, they’re church candles. Remember the church that closed down across town? I bought them there.’”

He closes the story with two words. “I understood.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Yesterday, I was at a team meeting for the upcoming Emmaus weekends. One of the songs we sang, became a prayer for me.

“Jesus of the sunrise, Light to whom I pray. Jesus of the sunrise, Wake me to my day. I would be your mirror. Be my sun. Let me come full circle to my centering. Shine in me, Lord. Shine in me, Lord. Shine in me. Shine in me. Shine in me.”^{iv}

The decision is before us. Will we be candles that hide in the closet refusing to light up for Christ or will we be a mirror, reflecting the light of Christ to our world. Let us “light up” the world through our lives so that the world might see the hope it yearns for.

Let us pray:

“Loving and saving God, show us all the ways that we hide from you and from ourselves. Guide us into the truth for the sake of Jesus.^v Amen.

ⁱ These three illustrations (Stewart, Tebow, Hernandez) are found in a Boston Globe Article by Michael Levinson on April 20, 2017 among other places.

ⁱⁱ Jennings, Willie James. Upper Room Disciplines 2018. Friday, March 9, p.90

ⁱⁱⁱ Lucado, Max God Came Near, Chapter 22: Light of the ... Storage Closet?

^{iv} “Jesus of the Colors”. Verse 3

^v Adapted from Upper Room Disciplines 2018 p.89