

John 3: 1- 21

If you have been watching the news lately, you know that we are living in a time that can feel very frightening.

In Japan----Earthquake, tsunami, food shortage, the threat of a meltdown at a nuclear power plant. The death toll rises daily and is expected to top 10,000. Nearly ½ a million people are homeless.

In the Near East, we continue to be at war in Afghanistan and there is unrest in Libya where the UN is initiating airstrikes. There is also unrest in a handful of other countries.

Closer to home we face rising gas prices and we still struggle with high unemployment and homelessness. There are random acts of violence every day.

Even closer than that, we face the illnesses and other problems of our own members, our own financial burdens, our own concerns and anxieties, our own grief and pain.

And as a result, it can seem that hope is a hard thing to hold onto, when so much is going wrong in so many places.

It seems like the world is getting darker and darker.

This week I read about a 9-year-old boy in Japan who was riding in a car driven by his father last week. His teenaged cousin was also in the car.

When the tsunami hit, the two boys were thrown out of the car. No one knows yet what happened to the father.

The 9 year old lost consciousness and was separated from his cousin. Someone found him floating in the water and pulled him out and he came to.

From the darkness of the huge wave, he was brought back to the light of life, but then another kind of darkness has set in.

He doesn't know where his dad is, or his mom or his grandmother. A kind neighbor has taken him in and is taking care of him, but he wants to find his family.

Every day he visits all the emergency shelters and places where people who have lost their homes are staying.

He carries two signs, one with their names and the other saying, "I will come back tomorrow".

He can't get back to his home yet to see if it's still standing because the roads are filled with debris, and it's just too hard to get that far on foot right now.

This little boy is in the darkness of not knowing, of maybe having lost his family and his home. And every day he goes out searching for the light----the light of his family's loving presence.

Lost and alone, looking and looking for the light, all day,  
every day.

We might just be lost in our own darkness, too --- a  
darkness of fear, a darkness of too much bad news. We  
might be wandering, like that little boy, in the darkness of our  
own personal grief or sadness or struggles.

No matter which direction we turn, it can sometimes  
seem that we can't find the love and light we are looking for.  
It might feel like we are walking and searching, carrying signs  
that tell the world what we are looking for, and then we have  
to do it all over again tomorrow, and the next day, and the  
next day.

All of our searching for light seems to be in vain, and the darkness just goes on and on.

We are lost in darkness and we want to find a way out.

Just like that little nine-year-old boy, we want to find the light that will free us from the threat of hopelessness, from fear, from anything that is keeping us in the dark.

The passage from the Gospel according to John that I read a few minutes ago introduced us to a man named Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a leader of the Jews, a Pharisee---that is, a member of a group of Jews who tried to keep all of the Jewish laws very strictly.

The Pharisees kept to themselves to avoid both the contamination of being influenced by other people and also of being distracted from their single-minded pursuit of righteousness.

Nicodemus, as a Pharisee, was not used to having anything to do with people other than Pharisees. And yet he and the other Pharisees had been watching Jesus.

It's not clear what they had heard about Jesus or seen him do. According to John, the only things Jesus had done at that point in his ministry were to turn the water into wine at a wedding, and to chase the moneychangers out of the temple.

And yet Nicodemus says, “WE know that you couldn’t do the things you do unless you were sent by God.”

The “we” implies that Nicodemus and the other Pharisees had been talking about Jesus, discussing who he might be, and they had concluded that he must be from God. Or maybe it was an indirect way of asking a question----“Are you from God? What’s your story?”

What signs, what miracles was he talking about? And what was his real reason for coming to Jesus?



He obviously had a motive, and there had to be a reason he came at night instead of during the daylight, while Jesus was teaching the crowds or even when he was with the disciples away from the crowds.

Maybe he was afraid of what the other Pharisees would think. Maybe he just wanted to avoid being with all those dirty, sinful peasants.

We don't know his reasons. All we know is that he came to Jesus under the cover of darkness.

Whatever his reason, we know one thing for sure----  
Nicodemus came from the darkness of the night looking for Jesus Christ, who is the light of the world.

Even though he was a very religious man, he had a question about Jesus---was he from God or not?

And Jesus explained to him, taught him, shed some light on the darkness of his life, and began a relationship with him. Later on, we read how Nicodemus stood up for Jesus, asking his fellow Pharisees, “Since when do we accuse people without any proof?”

After the crucifixion, it was Nicodemus who went to the tomb with Joseph of Arimethea, another “secret” disciple, taking spices to embalm the body of Jesus.

So we know that Jesus' words had a lasting effect and that Nicodemus was brought closer to Jesus Christ because of this night-time visit.

The passage begins with that night-time visit and ends with Nicodemus beginning to see the light that is Christ.

Even though Nicodemus came at night, the light was there for him.

The light did not turn away from him even at night, even though he didn't quite understand what Jesus was talking about when he was talking about being born again.

The first hearers of this passage lived sometime in the late first century. This was Good News for them for the same reason that it's good news for us----the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

Even though Nicodemus came by night, the light shone brightly for him---brightly enough that his heart and soul were touched by the words of Christ,

brightly enough that his question about where Christ was from and who he was must have been answered, because he came to Jesus' tomb to prepare his body for burial.

No matter how dark the world was for the first Christians, they knew they could be saved by the love of God found in Jesus Christ, who is the light of the world.

No matter how dark the world is for us, we can come to Jesus Christ, too.

And in the presence of Christ we will find that the darkness has not, CANNOT, overcome the light!

So what does this mean in our lives?

It means we have hope. It means that we are not alone in the darkness of our lives. It means that no matter what we are going through, what we are struggling with, or how bad things are for us, we can find comfort, peace, and love in the presence of Jesus Christ.

So how do we come into the presence of Jesus? There are several ways---

We can also pray---pray and pray some more. Not just asking “Help me, help me, help me” but also listening for God’s response, waiting for the light to shine in the darkness.

There are many ways to pray---eyes closed, hands folded is just the beginning. You can write your prayers, draw your prayers, knead bread or clay, dance or stomp, sing or wail your prayers.

You can even be mad at God. God can handle whatever we say and do in prayer.

So we have reading scripture and praying. A third way to find the light of the world in the darkness is to worship--- private devotions and Sunday worship. God is still God even when the world seems to be going down the tubes! God is always worthy of our praise and worship.

A fourth way of finding light in the night is very intertwined with worship.

When we are praising God together, it is the fellowship of the Body of Christ that can help us to see light in the darkness. Even if we are close to hopelessness and despair, the rest of the Body of Christ can carry us to the source of that light.



We can lift each other up as we sing, pray, and hear God's word together.

This is part of the mission of the church---to carry each other when we are too weak to stand by ourselves. A burden shared is lighter to carry.

A heavy heart is lifted by the care of another person.

Sometimes I say that we should be the Body of Christ and share the light of Christ with the world.

It works among us, too.

We can be the light of Christ for each other. Being members of the same congregation means much more than just being friends and knowing each other's names. It even means more than naming each other in our prayers!

It means being the Christ to each other. It means loving each other the way Christ loves us. It means shining light into the darkness that sometimes overtakes us.

The little 9-year-old Japanese boy who is looking for his family----he has been reunited with his cousin. The light grew brighter for him at that time. I hope and pray that he will be reunited with the rest of his family.

But even if they are gone, washed out of his life by the tsunami, I have great hope that the light will shine in his dark life once again, shining from the love and care of the neighbor who has taken him in, shining from the help that is coming from other people in other countries, including us.

He has great strength for one so young. I am sure that he will pass on to others whatever light shines into his life.

May we, too, share the light that shines on us. Amen.