

The Courage to Love the Light

Rev. Nick Hatch

John 3:14-21

Would you pray with me?

God of light, give us the courage to be faithful to you and bind us together more tightly in this fragmented world. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, Oh our rock and redeemer. Amen.

Ever find yourself pushed to the brink by something rather mundane? Well, the other day Maddison lost her air pods: and that was it. It was inconvenience too many and in exasperation she went to her very last resort: she asked dad for help! So, we began turning her room upside down, spilling out drawers and tearing of sheets, flipping pockets inside out and disassembling furniture. You learn a lot from someone when all their space is brought into the light. And you know what I saw? Piles of candy wrappers (Sarah Wilterdink you had a hand in this), empty gum containers, the remnants of Bo-Bo bars and organic beef sticks were EVERYWHERE! Now this wasn't a hug surprise, Maddi has hidden wrappers throughout the house since she could walk. So many times, we have said "Please just throw them away!" I mean why eat Reses peanut butter cups in the far reaches of your parents' closet? Why must granola bars be consumed behind the furnace in the basement? We have made it clear to her she can eat all these things there is nothing to hide, its ok if we see wrappers in

trash cans, and her response has always been the same “I don’t know why I do it! I just like to keep things hidden!”

Likewise, our scripture unmask our predisposition with keeping some things hidden, also provides one of the best-known verses in the bible:

For God so loved the world he gave his only begotten son.

Despite us, God’s love is selfless, offered with great suffering and compassion, done in such a way that Immanuel, God with us, would walk by our side and know the fullness of human life. “Kosmos” is the word in Greek for “world” and it means “world, humankind, earth or in other contexts “adornment or decoration.” So, God’s love is meant for the whole world to be a love with-us, for-us, through-us, and beyond-us. We receive the assurance that Jesus came not to condemn the world, but to save the world.

Yet John’s gospel also says that “those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”

Now we are left with a reasonably tortuous question: Does John proclaim God’s love for the whole world, or is God’s love reserved for those who believe- those whose deeds are done in the light, and have faith?

Theologians have wrestled with this question, or similar questions for centuries. At the heart of the question is a dynamic and vibrant tension

between grace and faith seen throughout the gospels and the entirety of the bible itself. But forcing a choice between grace and faith, between knowing and not knowing how God's election of people works, risks codifying a living relationship with Christ. While teaching principles is essential, trying to codify- or create a rigid set of rules which operate as an unbending system, doesn't work for relationships and it doesn't work for faith. The vibrant tension we know as people of faith that exists between grace and faith is synergetic and to "hammer down" a simple "answer" injects rigidity where organic movement- and life- is required.

We live in a time where world leaders regularly try to codify the world through language of "good vs evil", truth vs falsehood, and use a split narrative to justify all kinds of war and torture and underhanded political gain or the seizing of power. These are not verses of straightforward comfort- they are verses which alarm us, unmask dangerous divisions, and point towards the age-old struggle that exists between exposing hidden truths and unearthing brutal histories which naturally are sought to be buried.

Not everything we seek to be buried is brutal, sometimes they are just embarrassing!

One day, a little girl is sitting and watching her mother do the dishes at the kitchen sink. She suddenly notices that her mother has several strands of white hair sticking out in contrast to her brunette hair. She looks at her mother and inquisitively asks: "Why are some of your hairs white, Mom?"

Her mother replied: “Well, every time that you do something wrong and make me cry or unhappy, one of my hairs turns white.”

The little girl thought about this revelation for a while and then asked: “Momma, then how come all of grandma’s hairs are already white?”

As a parent, a spouse, a pastor, Jesus’s invitation to “have our deeds done in the light” means avoiding codifying relationships and often confronting some frustrating hidden truths and histories that, well, don’t serve as the best object lessons.

I wonder do you have any history or hidden truths that when brought into the light, might constitute your reconciliation to the living Christ?

Recently, I was reading an article called “Why these past 10 years have been uniquely stupid” where the author uses the metaphor of the Tower of Babel to explain what is taking place in the fragmentation of our community life as it relates to digital media influences. Just as when the original descendants of Noah built a great city in the land of Shinar and God came down to confuse their languages making them unable to speak to one another, the author says:

This is the best metaphor I have found for what started happening in America in the 2010s, and for the fractured country we now inhabit. Something went terribly wrong, very suddenly. We are disoriented, unable to speak the same language or recognize the same truth. We are cut off from one another and from the past. Babel is not just a story about red

*America and blue America with two different version of the Constitution, economics, and American history or tribalism. It's about the fragmentation of everything and the scattering of people who had been a community. – Jonathan Haidt *Why the Past Ten Years have been Uniquely Stupid* Atlantic May 22*

It cannot be understated how radically social media has been engineered since its inception over twenty years ago. What was once a collection of relatively simple platforms has become a fiercely warped and profitable environment of complex algorithms, powerful companies purposefully enhancing “virality” – the spreading of any kind of content which usually weaponizes the frivolous and outrageous, and the creation of an unending stream of altered reality. Realities individually tailored comprising completely juxtaposed and antithetical information.

In fact, as I am writing this, a headline came across my screen saying “The new mysterious social media account schooling congress on how to do its job?”

I don't know about you but I cringe at the idea of a mysterious influence, educating, or communicating with government or leadership! Yet, this is the shadowy world we live in.

So, this is the point in the sermon where one might expect me to “codify” social media as belonging to the “dark forces” and a representation of the unseen evil our scripture points towards. And, ostensibly, this is partly true; social media has become a well-constructed tower of babel. Sociologists

have identified three major forces that collectively bind together successful democracies: social capital, strong institutions, and shared stories. And the tower of social media has eroded all three.

Yet the sociological struggle taking place is no surprise for us people of faith, for Jesus said:

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. People loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.

These are not versus of straightforward comfort- they alarm us, unmask dangerous divisions, and point towards the age-old struggle that exists between exposing hidden truths and unearthing brutal histories which naturally are sought to be buried.

What fascinates me is this image that started our scripture today, of Moses lifting up the serpent. In some cultures, the serpent is positive and powerful though dangerous, in others, including the Jewish and Christian traditions, the serpent often symbolizes the evil in the world and in all of us.

But John is actually looking back in history to Numbers 21.5–8 where the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness, grumbled against Moses, and were punished by poisonous snakes invading the camp, killing many of them. God gave Moses the remedy: he was to make a serpent out of bronze, put it on a pole and hold it up for people to look at. Anyone who

looked at the serpent on the pole would live. The serpent entwined around the pole, a symbol which appears widely today, remains a sign of healing, used by various medical organizations.

Well later on, in the book of Kings, the bronze serpent was thereafter stored in the Tabernacle as a sacred object, until, much later, King Hezekiah discovered that the people were worshipping it, and broke it to pieces.

One scholar says this of the serpent:

This, in fact, is the only place in the New Testament where the bronze serpent is referred to. Here it points clearly to the death of Jesus. Moses put the serpent on a pole, and lifted it up so the people could see it; even so, the **son of man** must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have **eternal life**. Humankind as a whole has been smitten with a deadly disease. The only cure is to look at the son of man dying on the cross, and find **life** through believing in him. – N.T.Wright

What John is claiming is that the evil that brought Jesus to the crucifixion is so embedded within us we cannot help but be confused and disoriented by it. And the only way forward is to shine light upon all evil, all truths, all history, all politics, all greed and all selfishness. The truth of Jesus Christ is the binding force of the Good News- the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I wonder where God's truth might be held high in our lives, but in a confusing and contrary form, that we have yet to see?

All our deeds are done in the face of God; no matter how removed or how algorithmically buried or masked, all the world stands before God. And it is the socially righteous love of a brown skinned profit Jesus Christ, Immanuel, who came for the Kosmos whose history is one of brutality and murder that we have to hold up on a pole. We do this so the world, can see itself, truthfully, this Lent. We do this as an act of rebellion. We do this because the exposition of the light of God calls forth the healing powers of the Holy Spirit. We do this, knowing it takes courage to love light and ask that the Spirit might bless us with such courage in ourselves, our families, our church, our business, and civic lives together.

How will you, and how will this church hold up the love of Jesus Christ highly so that the Fox Valley, and whole world might clearly see God's hope?

How will this honesty bring forth the hope of the binding force of the community of Jesus Christ which longs for justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream?

The binding principles for Christian community might best be boiled down to this: a historically critical and scripturally faithful living relationship with our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

And our call is to not stuff our faith into nooks and crannies where nobody will notice it, where others don't have to confront injustice or human suffering, where hiding a progressive understanding of the Gospel could

cause us to be condemned. But beware: this call may bring forth a few white hairs.

Yet, our truth shall still be a binding force for societal good long after the many false seemingly indestructible towers that surround us, which we worship, have crumbled into the earth.

Thousands of years ago, Moses held a serpent high on a stick to foreshadow the coming of Christ and the healing power of God through him. And I believe two thousand years from now there will be a faithful community, wandering about in some wilderness, perhaps in a disoriented and fragmented world like our own, who will help others clearly see these lives before God. And they too will struggle like us with the human tendency keep hidden the truth, who they rely are- like a teenager and her candy wrappers.

“For 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.”

Amen.