

Light in the Darkness

By Gary Patterson

It seems clear at the outset, that the Gospel of John sets about to establish a theme of Light vs Darkness as he introduces the reader to his best friend – who just happens to be the God of the universe. Yes, yes, I know. We all are trained to say that Jesus is our best friend. This idea is celebrated even in our songs, such as the line in the old hymn, “He will hear you when you call, he will help you when you fall. O the best friend to have is Jesus.”

And lovely as that sentiment may be to us, this is not what we are talking about in the Gospel of John. He means “friend” in a very literal and personal way. His best friend was the real person he walked and talked with in a radical, physical presence, in real time and actual locations. But the zinger in it all was that this real, physical, on location, in real time person, also just happened to be the God of the Universe. Wrap your mind around that one.

We are well acquainted with John’s prologue to the gospel:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.”¹

Unfortunately, we tend at this point to cut away from the flow John is establishing and skip to verse 14, which talks about the Word being made flesh – which is fine if we are exploring the eternity of the Creator – but such a skip interrupts a theme that is being established which is crucial to what follows in the Gospel, an emphasis on light and darkness.

“In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”²

So significant is this light and darkness theme, that the gospel refers to it twenty four times, and it sets up a contrast that helps us understand what comes next – in the proper light – so to speak.

Clearly the Gospel of John sets about to introduce the reader to Jesus and declare him to be the Messiah. But as I looked at this proclamation in the first few chapters – delivered by various individuals and events – I began to wonder, when does Jesus first announce and claim that title himself. So I set about reading the record of those early days of his ministry searching for that first clear declaration from his own lips, stating that he actually was the Messiah.

The first event of this introduction in the Gospel, is Jesus' encounter with John the Baptist:

“John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, ‘This was he of whom I said, He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’ I am the voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’ I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.”³

“The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, ‘Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, a man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’ I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.”⁴

“Then John gave this testimony: I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.”⁵

“The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, ‘Look, the Lamb of God!’”⁶

Now that is clear enough I would think. Yet in all this, Jesus does not make the claim of Messiahship. These two former disciples of John – now disciples of Jesus accepted him as their new leader on the word of John the Baptist.

“Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, ‘We have found the Messiah.’”⁷

Now we have three followers who are joined the next day by Philip and Nathaniel who declares, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.”⁸ That is all rather clear and potent stuff. But we still do not have the direct claim to Messiahship by Jesus that we are looking for.

It would seem that the next event, in the mind of a good publicist, would be the ideal time for such an announcement – at least Mary, his mother seemed to think so. It is the report of the first recorded miracle of Jesus, turning water into wine. And lest you think this was just a bottle or two, do the calculations. It was 150 gallons or about one half ton of wine. But still no announcement.

With the Passover nearing, Jesus went to Jerusalem and found a corrupt market extravaganza raging on in the name of religion and worship. “In the temple courts he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, ‘Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!’”⁹

Again, in the mind of a hired publicist, this would certainly seem to be a moment of broad recognition, but still no announcement:

“While he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man.”¹⁰

Next, in chapter 3, comes the story of Nicodemus, which we are inclined to read in an indulgent light, given that in the end he does come to anoint the dead body of Jesus. But if we read the story accurately, it is not complimentary. And rather than start with chapter 3 as we usually do, we need to go back to the real introduction of the story. It reads thus:

“Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man. Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council.”¹¹

What is the implication here? What is it that Jesus knows about this man? And one other question – why did this man come at night? Is this story falling into the “light/darkness” theme set up in the introduction?

But wait. There is more. In the following chapter, there is a woman who meets Jesus at Jacob’s well near Sychar at noon, in full sunlight. A man and a woman. Darkness and light. You might say these stories are as different as night and day. But let’s pursue these differences a little further. Nicodemus was famous as a member of the Jewish ruling council, a noted religious leader. The woman – whose name we do not know – was famous too, or maybe we should say infamous, living with a man who was not her husband and having had five husbands before. How is that for contrast.

Nicodemus speaks first with a complement in that conversation, but at the well, Jesus opens the conversation with a request for a drink, to which the woman replies with a rather rude observation about a Jewish man speaking to a woman he does not know, who also happens to be a Samaritan. It is interesting to note how quickly both conversations shift – the first from positive to negative and the second from negative to positive.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that things must change saying, “Unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”¹² We quite generally interpret this new birth experience in the context of our own personal salvation and eternal life. But I think something else is going on here. Perhaps Jesus is telling this religious leader that without a new birth, without a new way of understanding the kingdom of God, he cannot see it when it is right in front of him. And despite containing one of the most famous texts in Scripture – John 3:16 – the story ends poorly.

Nicodemus, rather than face the obvious meaning of Jesus’ words, quibbles with a foolish response. “How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born!”¹³ Obviously, Nicodemus did not believe that, nor did he assume that Jesus believed it either. Rather, he sought to avoid facing the changes required for entering the kingdom of God that were being brought in by Jesus. The summary of this conversation brings us back to the light and darkness theme again. Imagine sneaking across town in the dark and then hearing these words:

“This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth

comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.”¹⁴

Meanwhile, back at the well, things are going in the opposite direction. Perceiving Jesus to be a prophet, the woman says, "I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."¹⁵ And finally we find what we have been looking for, the declaration from Jesus own lips, "I who speak to you am he."¹⁶

The woman leaves the water pot at the well and returns to the town she left only minutes earlier as the reputed sinner of Sychar. But in that amount of time, she has been changed into the ranking evangelist. “Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, ‘He told me everything I ever did.’ So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. And because of his words many more became believers. They said to the woman, ‘We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world.’”¹⁷

So there you have it. Following the conversation with Nicodemus – nothing. Following the conversation at the well, the first congregation forms in Sychar as Jesus declares his Messiahship. Perhaps this – and one other declaration, the announcement of the resurrection, which we will come to in a minute – are the most important and dramatic announcements that Jesus makes in his entire ministry. And it is to a woman of the despised Samaritans that he entrusts the preaching of this great news.

Yet back in Jerusalem, the Jewish ruling council continues in their bent to establish and enforce the rules of religion. That is what authoritarian religious institutions are prone to do. Perhaps it is over the rules for Sabbath observance that they are shown to be at their most foolish extremes. It was at the pool of Bethesda where Jesus saw the tragic sight of human misery.

“Here a great number of disabled people used to lie — the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, ‘Do you want to get well?’ The invalid replied, ‘I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.’ Then Jesus said to him, ‘Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.’ At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.

“The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, and so the Jews said to the man who had been healed, ‘It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat.’ But he replied, ‘The man who made me well said to me’, ‘Pick up your mat and walk.’ So they asked him, ‘Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?’ The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there.”

“Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, ‘See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.’ The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jews persecuted him.”¹⁸

It is institutional religious authoritarianism run amuck. Where did they come up with a rule that says it is unlawful to heal on the Sabbath. They couldn’t do it, and neither could anyone else. But that was their rule, and they were determined to enforce it, no matter how foolish it was. And again, with the man born blind, we find the same bizarre accusation.

“The day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man's eyes was a Sabbath. Therefore, the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. ‘He put mud on my eyes, and I washed, and now I see.’ Some of the Pharisees said, ‘This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.’”¹⁹

Seeing Jesus as a threat to their cozy little control club, they set about to destroy him. And it was on the preparation day for a high Passover Sabbath that the deed was accomplished. About three hours before the sun would go down, Jesus said, “It is finished.”²⁰ With that, he bowed his head and died. So one problem for the Pharisees was solved in time for proper Sabbath observance. But there remained two others – the thieves were still alive.

And now comes the most bizarre requirement for keeping the Sabbath I can imagine. “Because the Jews did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down.”²¹ Somehow it had been determined by the authoritarian religious elite that it was not lawful to heal on the Sabbath. But it was mandatory to break people’s legs in order to keep it properly. Surely this is the consummate example of religious authority run amuck.

But the story does not end there. It is in darkness again, early on Sunday morning that Mary of Magdala went to the tomb. Upon finding it empty, she ran to tell Simon and John that

the stone had been removed and Jesus was no longer there. Running back to the tomb as light is dawning, they find that it is true, he is not there. But:

“They still did not understand that Jesus had risen from the dead. Then the disciples went back to their homes, but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, ‘Woman, why are you crying?’ ‘They have taken my Lord away,’ she said, ‘and I don't know where they have put him.’ At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. ‘Woman,’ he said, ‘why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?’

“Thinking he was the gardener, she said, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Mary.’ She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, ‘Rabboni!’ (which means Teacher).

“Jesus said, ‘Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’ Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: ‘I have seen the Lord!’”²²

So there it is again. Not only is the announcement of Messiahship given to a woman who becomes the ranking evangelist. But the announcement of the resurrection is given to a woman who is sent as the first apostle to proclaim the good news of salvation.

Thus it is also with us. We are all united in the service of the Master. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.”²³

RESPONSIVE READING

LEADER: Lead me Lord to know Your grace, not just received but spread abroad.

CONGREGATION: Teach me that forgiveness shared, reflects from me the love of God.

LEADER: Lead me Lord, lead me Lord, lead me through Your grace.

CONGREGATION: Lead me by Your gentle hand, soon to see Your face.

SCRIPTURAL REFERENCES FROM NIV

- 1 John 1:1-3
- 2 John 1:4-12
- 3 John 1:15,23&26
- 4 John 1:29-30
- 5 John 1:32-34
- 6 John 1:36
- 7 John 1:40
- 8 John 1:49
- 9 John 2:14-16
- 10 John 2:23-25
- 11 John 2:24-3:1
- 12 John 3:3
- 13 John 3:4
- 14 John 4:19-21
- 15 John 4:25
- 16 John 4:26
- 17 John 4:37-42
- 18 John 5:3-15
- 19 John 9:14-16
- 20 John 19:30
- 21 John 19:31
- 22 John 20:9-18
- 23 Galatians 3:28-29