

“Encountering Light”
March 1, 2026

Numbers 21:4-9
John 3:14-2

As I thought about the account of Jesus and Nicodemus during recent weeks, I started to think that just one sermon wasn't going to capture all that this story contains. Perhaps, I thought, I should preach on it twice. Or maybe I could say all that needed to be said if I preached on this story on all of the Sundays in Lent.

I rejected those options and was ready with one sermon—until I woke up yesterday morning. I returned to the text with a new perspective. And I needed a new sermon.

I hesitated to go to rewrite. Voices in my household said I should. And my brother emailed me with his thought that many sermons would be rewritten on Saturday. I've said this before, but if you can avoid having a brother or sister in your family who is an ordained minister and known around the world as a Christian ethicist, you should do that.

What I'm saying has been somewhat hastily written but my prayer and my hope is that it will speak something of the good news on this troubling weekend as we move into what will be a troubling week ahead. I'd like to have a well-reasoned, articulate examination of our current world situation. That's not going to happen today.

What I do have is a glimpse of the light of God that shines in this morning's scripture lessons.

In that light, as Christians we are able to look at the world head on. Any response to the upheaval we are seeing must be made with our eyes wide open—wide open to the death and destruction that people bring upon each other.

We as a nation have not yet formally declared war—so this is our president's war of choice. As we ourselves veer even more towards autocracy, who knows if Congress will claim its authority.

There will those who argue that this is just cause. There are those who argue it can in no way be just. The reality is that war places all of us and all of our arguments under the judgement of God. And I will come back to that—but let us start with Nicodemus.

Paintings of Jesus meeting with Nicodemus are usually studies in contrast. We often see Nicodemus obscured by the nighttime shadows. Our gaze is drawn toward Jesus, who seems to radiate light.

These paintings are clear, as are the words of the Gospel of John: in this Jesus, the light of God has come into the world. The love of God is shown for the whole world.

It's easier, of course, to limit God's love to those we think are “deserving,” those who are the “right people,” those who are “like us.” The current heresy of Christian nationalism

proclaims just that: *this nation* is loved by God, *Christians* are loved by God. And this ideology allows for the dehumanization of those outside our nation, of those who are not Christian.

Listen carefully, then: “For God so loved *the world* . . .” There’s something unexpected here.

It is good news for all people—pushing us well beyond a comfortable nationalism that makes “others” and “outsiders” less than human, expendable.

When we would draw the line, because we do not want to love, God crosses the line and comes near. The One who created us and gave us life wants that life to be abundant and whole.

As John tells the good news, forgiveness of sins was not the main reason God came among us in Jesus of Nazareth. God was in Christ that the whole world and *each one of us* might have life.

Such new life is not without its birth pains. When I was in Divinity School there was a poster in a hallway showing a cloth doll coming through the wringers of an old-fashioned clothes dryer—the kind my grandmother had. At some point—whether that’s at Divinity School or someplace else—most of us learn what it’s like to be run through the wringers. Adding to the words of Jesus in the Gospel of John, the poster read: “The truth will set you free—but first it will make you miserable.” By God’s grace, after that misery, we find new life. We live in a new light.

The love of God—God’s desire for our life—is made visible in Jesus Christ, the light of the world.

Of course, this light is also a judgment, a light from which we can turn away.

This is the paradox: the light of Christ is both life and judgment.

Let’s be honest. There are parts of each one of us—perhaps big chunks of our lives—that recoil from the light of Christ, parts of us that prefer life in the shadows.

Remember those times when you wake up before daylight. You flip on a light. And how the brightness hurts. Your eyes close. And you have to make a decision. Do you go with the light or stay in the darkness?

And so, we come back again to judgment.

The Greek word for judgment is *krisis*. And rather than meaning condemnation, *krisis* suggests a time of choosing, of deciding.

God's love creates a crisis in our lives.

“This is the judgment,” Jesus says, “The light has come into the world but the people preferred darkness to light.”

And here we are as a nation once more—in a time of crisis, a time to choose, and in that sense, a time to judge which way to go.

“This is the judgment. . .” Jesus says. But the judgment, the crisis, is ours, not God's.

We need to be clear about this. God loves the *world*. Jesus came not to judge but to save. The crisis asks us if we will respond to the light or retreat into the familiar darkness.

Maybe this is where we need to go back to those snakes in the desert.

Jesus talks with Nicodemus and reminds him of the story of Moses that we heard this morning. Yes, like much of the Bible it seems strange and foreign to us. But Nicodemus, a good, religious man, would have known about the grumbling in the wilderness, about the serpents that were a judgment and the bronze serpent that was salvation.

The wilderness brought the Hebrew people freedom from the Egyptians, but it was a perilous freedom. They passed down stories and songs of this time in the wilderness that told not how good and faithful they were, but how good and faithful God was in holding to God's covenant commitment.

When there was not water, they complained—and God gave the people water.

When there was no food, they complained—and God gave the people food.

Another time they complained, and God, being God, met their complaints with poisonous serpents. There is judgment here—certainly a warning well taken not to mess with the Holy One—or as we heard Jesus put it to the devil last Sunday: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

Several snakebites later, the people came to their senses and turned in a new direction. They repented. They did just what you and I would do: they asked that the snakes be taken away.

God tells Moses to make a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Whoever was bitten and would look at the serpent would live.

The poisonous snakes were still there. But there was also healing and life.

Strange.

Yet doesn't it sound familiar? We're surrounded by serpents, yet wholeness is still offered.

The Jewish people long ago affirmed what Christians would later find central to our faith: Our sin is met by the unmerited grace—the eternal life—of God. I've said this before and I can't repeat it often enough: one God is revealed throughout the scriptures—one God of

overwhelming love. There is no “wrathful” God of the Old Testament replaced by the “loving” God of the New Testament. All scripture points to the One God who gives life and life eternal.

So, the Gospel of John speaks of the Son *lifted up*—lifted up on a cross. The word translated “lifted up” can also mean “exalted.” When Jesus is lifted up on a cross, he is exalted. In this act we see again what was known long before: the God who created us wants our lives to be whole and healthy, wants us to be set free from all that would make us less than fully human, from all that separates us from God and others and even the best in ourselves.

The serpents are a symbol of the crisis that is involved with God's love.

The serpents of life are most visible when we lower our sights and look down instead of keeping our eyes on the horizon—the future of life that God offers.

Faith grows out of the crises of our lives, the choices that we make both when life is difficult and when life offers great joy.

Always we can choose the distant horizon, life in Christ that gives us strength and courage to face the serpents of the present time.

Where is your horizon? How far ahead can you see?

Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, raising the sightlines of the people to see a new future. So, too, Jesus says, he must be lifted up—on a cross which will set our eyes on death, but also lifted up from the tomb, giving us a new horizon of for life. In Christ the horizon grows. Life itself is pushed to its limits.

When we envision a horizon that holds the hope of life, we are free to act without fear, free to act in truth and love today because those very qualities seem to shape our own destiny.

We can look up and see something beyond death. Beyond every death, large and small, there is resurrection, new life. Life comes out of death; light comes into our darkness. And that changes everything. In Christ, the horizon of our life expands.

I don't know. Like you, I just don't know. I don't know what today or the days ahead will bring. There are those who watched the execution of thousands protesting in the streets of Tehran who say that something needed to be done. There are those who say that war is never the answer. There are those who look at our nation's abysmal record in attempt regime change and see only bad, if unintended, consequences.

We don't know.

Because of this, let us keep our eyes open and looking toward the light. Beyond judgment is the love of God, greater than we could imagine.

With open eyes, look at Jesus lifted up.

On the cross is the light of the world.

That light is our hope. That light is our life.