

Exposed to the Light

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John 3: 11-21

Before I took up my post here at Duke, I was fortunate enough to make many short trips to the United States. Very often, with the time difference, on the first night of each visit I'd find myself awake in a hotel room at around 3 in the morning. And I'd often try to find something of interest on TV. At that time of night, as far as I can tell, you've got basically two options. You can go for ultra-conservative *preachers*, selling their latest program for happiness and prosperity; or ultra-toned *models* selling their latest slimming program. (Which I suppose tells us that the only people actually awake in America at 3 in the morning are overweight Christians.)

But in the midst of all this instant salvation and instant flab reduction, occasionally you'll find a third type of night-time show, even more exciting. And it's turned into a genre all of its own: the police chase, where you (the viewer) get to join a police squad and pursue a criminal for about 20 minutes. It often ends up at night with you in a helicopter. In front of you is a giant searchlight aimed at the victim on the ground. The offender, of course, does all he can to dodge the searchlight, dashing this way and that, darting under hedges, between trees, under cars, behind walls. But eventually, he ends up with nowhere to go and frozen to the spot.

Exposed and condemned. Like the hedgehog caught by the headlights on your driveway, he curls up tight on the ground, tight against the light. (And the ground team moves in.)

'For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest their deeds should be exposed.' John tells us.

I expect in most cases, the offender's been living in the dark for some time; months, perhaps years. Criminals tend to be photo-phobic, in every sense. Night is the time to steal, the time to escape jail. Most crime is committed in the dark, and most planning of crime too. The dark world of crime is glamorized in a hundred movies: the murky alley and shady street corner; the stark basement with a single overhead bulb, and an endless Poker game; Godfather figures sucking spaghetti in subdued backrooms, mumbling *sotto voce* (in words we never quite understand). This is the shadowy world criminals learn to inhabit, where evil deeds breed evil deeds; the underground world, the underworld, the world most of us never see; the world that shuns the light of day, that hides from the white light of justice. And it's got its own kind of attraction to those who live in it, this underworld – people learn to like the dark, enjoy it, *love* it even.....

'...and people loved darkness rather than light', John tells us, after Nicodemus comes to see Jesus....at *night*.

Of course, all this is a thousand miles away from anything we'd ever get up to. And the TV channels want to reassure you about that. That's why they put us *behind* the searchlight in the helicopter, never in front of it. Because that's where

we *want* to be; behind the light, shining it on others. Training a spotlight on some multiple offender will remind us there's always someone worse than us. And that's comforting. (And let's face it, at 3 in the morning, as overweight Christians, we're going to need all the comfort we can get.) This is the way so much news commentary gets our attention – it divides the world nice and neatly into innocent and guilty, and we the innocent viewer get a chance to spotlight and convict the guilty (preferably in color). So we're made to side with Bill O'Reilly against the liberals, or with John Stewart against Jim Cramer, or whatever. Whichever way, we're always in the helicopter *behind* the searchlight; the *others* are the ones who need exposing. And who can deny we get a certain frisson of satisfaction? When we occupy the moral high air (so to speak), and hover above the guilty, exposing and condemning those on the ground: when Bernie Madoff is at last brought out into the open, his evil deeds exposed to full public glare? When AIG employees get their bonuses disclosed, after years in the underworld of finance? Or when AIG's hapless chairman blushes and squirms under interrogation, turning and curling in the dark, as the light moves ever closer....

'For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest their deeds should be exposed.' John tells us, as the enemies of God are gradually uncovered.

All very satisfying. Until of course someone nudges the searchlight, and it catches *our* faces. Then it all feels a little different. However well we put on the innocent front, most of us are photo-phobic at some level, even if only very deep down.

- Why is it that one of the commonest dreams people have is the one about being caught naked in public? Acting in the high school play, delivering the commencement address, reading in Church, preaching (dare I say it). When the spotlight is on you, but you suddenly realize you're without the mighty protection of your Calvin Kleins. What does all this say?
- Why is it that one of the commonest fears among academics is 'being found out'? (As research shows.) We may have impeccable qualifications, we've been honest, we've never lied about ourselves. Whether we're Faculty or student, you've got into Duke fair and square. But somehow there's a lurking sense you've been bluffing your way through too many lectures, name-dropping in too many seminars. Everyone seems to think you're smarter than you really are. You've got by so far, but it's only a matter of time before someone's going to call your bluff, expose you to the terrifying searchlight of superior brilliance. 'Academic photophobia.' What does all this say?
- And why do so many of us have this intense fear of *surveillance* in public places? Those little cameras we see everywhere – in the gas station, the library, the street corner, the shopping mall? Why are we so worried if we're not doing anything illegal? Why do *security* cameras make us feel so *insecure*. What does all this say? Why the anxiety? Why the fear?

Why the fear? Presumably, because we know there's always something in us to condemn (perhaps a lot), and *someone* to do the condemning. So we prefer the

fragile security of darkness, burying vast areas of our lives; we learn how to curl up like hedgehogs in the dark, tight against the light.

And of course it's even worse when the light happens to be the light of God.

'Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed.' John tells us, after Nicodemus meets Jesus, the Son of God.

God. This passage isn't simply an exercise on the psychology of denial. It's about what happens when *God* gets to work. When the searchlight of *God* searches us. Now things are far more uncomfortable. For we can always hide from others. But not from God. Not from the God who sees all and knows all, our violent moodswings, our inbuilt laziness, the illegal agreements, the white lies, the words we never dare to speak, the thoughts we never let out. It's all known to God, all open to the divine scrutiny, all seen by the Unseen See-er, all visible to the all-seeing God, the God unto whom all hearts are open and from whom no secrets are hidden. There's no bush we can dart under, no wall to hide behind, no hiding place we can scuttle to, to be safe with our secrets – all is visible to God, to the searchlight of God, the searching light of God. In the words of the Spiritual, 'it causes me to tremble.'

And Nicodemus too, no doubt. Nicodemus, who peeps out of his own darkness at night. He's puzzled by Jesus, curious about the miracles, wanting to know more, but likely sensing some parts of his life were murkier than they should be.

But now he's met by God's light direct, God's light in one man, Jesus; God's light in Person, and it's focused right *on* him, Nicodemus – searching him, exposing him, laying him bare. Now he finds his own night was darker than he thought – he can't cope with these strange words about having to go into a womb and be born a second time, about having to trust, believe in this Jesus

'whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.'

So Nicodemus slips out of the story, back into the night. What else can he do? And what else can we do – when met by God's only Son, God's searchlight – focused on us; what can we do except curl up in our own darkness, exposed and condemned, tight against the light?

But wait. What *is* this searching light? The light that searches the darkness, and searches our darkness? Suppose we'd got it wrong?

What if the light isn't to be feared?

What if the light doesn't have to be hated and shunned?

What if the contrasts in our passage really mean something?

We love *darkness*, and hate the light of God.

But God so loved the *world*, including those in darkness

We love darkness, and can't believe we could be anything other than *condemned*.

But God so loved the world he sent his Son *not* to *condemn* the world, but that the world might be *saved* through him. Saved. Rescued.

What if this light *were* searching us, but to *rescue* us, not condemn us – rescue us from our own darkness?

Well, it's a nice thought. But how can that happen if we love darkness rather than light? How can this Jesus rescue us if we're forever curling up in our own darkness, tight against the light?

How? Only if he enters that darkness himself. It's hinted at here in the passage; in this coded language about the 'Son of Man being lifted up' – an allusion to Jesus being lifted up on a cross on Good Friday, the day of darkness.

Yes, Nicodemus may have slipped away into the dark, but Jesus doesn't leave him there.

Judas goes out into the night. But Jesus doesn't abandon him there.

He goes out into that same night.

He becomes the guilty one.

He is searched out in the garden . . . at night.

He is condemned by the High Priest . . . at night.

And he takes the journey into the very pit of human darkness, where evil deeds breed evil deeds. At Golgotha, he's condemned with the condemned, accused with the accused:

with those we love to expose and convict – the serial offender, the child molester;

with those we want to shove into darkness; the mentally ill, curled up in hopelessness.

He journeys to those parts of ourselves we'd rather forget – the places we spend our lives trying to keep tight. There he goes into the unspeakable depths we've created for ourselves by shutting out God, shutting out God's light. There he goes, naked. 'And there was darkness over the whole land.'

There are no depths to which we can plunge that God's light has not already shone – the light of forgiveness, the light of rescue, the light of love.

If *that's* true, if that's true, there's no need to fear being exposed by *this* light, no need to live in some underworld, no need to curl up, tight against the light. Now we can delight in the Light. That's why John ends this passage, not in the dark, but by telling us what it means 'to come into the light,' as he puts it, to live in the light.

'whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they do has been done through God.'

It's an odd expression. Perhaps the best way to think of it comes from music. The French composer Debussy once said he wanted his music to sound as if it were 'lit from behind'. Lit from behind. And that's what the music sounds like – every

note transparent to every note behind it, every harmony translucent to the ones behind. It's as if a huge, warm light were shining from behind the music.

So it is if we 'come into the light', live in the light. Now we're not standing behind the searchlight, and we're not standing under it, condemned by it, we're being lit from behind.

I think of a young man I heard speak earlier this week;

about a remarkable ministry he's set up in Durham among young people at risk. He talked about the way those who are rejected at home or school find a kind of welcome they've never experienced before, the unmistakable, unconditional welcome of the Son of God.

There was something about him as he spoke, something we could all see plainly in him and his colleagues: an unhurried confidence . . . no fear, lit from behind

I think of an elderly woman who used to clean my office in Cambridge;

she didn't say much, but in her endless gestures of concern for me, she spoke volumes; she prayed every day for me and everyone else in that College;

There was something about her you could see plainly,
..... no fear, lit from behind

And perhaps we might dare to think of ourselves here this morning,

where the searchlight of God has come to search us out again.

Having heard his voice, having heard the call to trust him again, we can leave the Chapel without fear, and when we go outside, it will be as if the sun[/Son] is shining from behind us; which – of course – *He is*.