

March 15, 2015, Fourth Sunday in Lent (John 3:14-21)

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by [Gracia Grindal](#) in the [March 4, 2015](#) issue

Here be dragons, as the old map says. John 3:16 may be well-charted territory, one of the most memorized Bible verses among Christians—all good news. But this week's Gospel reading starts back with Moses and the brass serpent (or dragon) and then goes on to talk about those in darkness and those who are or are not condemned. By the time we hear all Jesus has to say, even Nicodemus himself has disappeared into the darkness whence he came.

The binary world of John's Gospel is well drawn in Jesus' talk here. But it is troubling to people who have been raised on uncertainty principles, who hate bright lines. Bright lines are fundamental to understanding this lesson. That God loved the world enough to give the only begotten Son is good news, but we don't always focus on this news. We prefer being in the place of the decider, not the decided upon. Thus we are worried about the darkness and the unknowns that frame the verse. How could a God of love condemn people? What does it mean to be in darkness?

Here is where the dragons be. The map ends here. In this region, there are things we do not know—truly uncharted territory. It is the nature of darkness to be frightening. It cannot be charted, because we cannot see what is there.

So instead of thinking of others lost in the night, maybe we could put ourselves in Nicodemus's place and think what it is like to be in the dark and truly lost. We know such feelings from our childhood, if not now. It's scary out there, as poet Kenneth Patchen (1911–1972) writes in “All the Roary Night”: “All around us / The footprints of the beast . . . / Of something above there / Something that doesn't know we exist.” This poem—from the point of view of an airplane pilot or space voyager trying

to make contact—gives flesh to our fear of the dark. We don't understand it because we can't see, yet people seem to be filled with a kind of nameless dread or anxiety. We know something is out there—something, maybe “the footprints of the beast.”

We have all looked out at space and realized our insignificance. We may know that we are not very significant in the face of the entire universe, which “doesn't know we exist.” (Is this why Nicodemus came to see Jesus?) We may even have an inkling that there is heartbreak out there, as Patchen goes on to say. It feels hopeless, and we feel meaningless. The poem is filled with fear and terror, something that is gnawing at the public psyche today as it hasn't so much before. Nicodemus's visit with Jesus makes more sense in this context, I think.

The good news in Jesus' contrast between darkness and light is that it does, in fact, have to do with us. The whole drama of salvation is that God has come into this world to find us and give us meaning. God, the God of all, is going to do everything to bring us into the light. The incarnation is about us. This is what the whole project is about, to bring us into the light, into communion with God.

I often feel I am living just at the edge of Patchen's “roary night.” Is that the darkness Nicodemus feels trapped in? Has he glimpsed some beam of Jesus' light and felt drawn toward it? Artist Henri Lindegaard draws Nicodemus with horizontal lines and Jesus with vertical ones. The light floods down from heaven to Jesus; he is free to go up and down. Nicodemus, however, looks to be caged in his earthbound reality. Jesus is the man from above, the one who can bring new birth and light to us. After we see the light and walk in it, like the Samaritan woman whom Jesus will soon meet, we begin to understand what the darkness was and that we were trapped in it.

From the darkness we are drawn to the light. It naturally draws us toward itself, as Jesus says he himself will do. Once we have seen it, how can we want anything else? Like the Israelites bitten by snakes in the wilderness, we cry out for salvation. Life is found by looking at the image of the very thing that kills.

The glory of this discourse is that now, because of Christ's journey to bring divinity to us in our own shape, we have seen a reality and a life so compelling that we must tell others. As Peter says in Acts 4, “We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.” Light is like that; it will be shared, not kept under a bushel basket. This is the urge behind what missionaries do—they go not to create clones but to show others this shining light, this new reality that could change everything.