

March 8, 2020

Give Up!
Give Up Darkness!
John 3:1-5

Opening words: How many times have you been asked the question, "What are you giving up for Lent?" It's a good question. Many in our area do give up something for Lent because it is a Roman Catholic tradition. The idea of giving up something for Lent is based on Matthew 16:24, "*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.*" So, giving up something for Lent is about self-denial. It's not a second chance at your broken New Year's resolution. Giving up something for Lent should be done prayerfully, so we can wholly renew ourselves in Christ. Giving up something for Lent is not a bad thing but a good thing. There are certain things that are holding us back spiritually.

This is sermon number three in this year's Lenten sermon series, *Give Up!* We are looking at things we need to give up because they are impeding our spiritual growth. We began last week by looking at control. In the weeks to come we will look at arrogance, enemies and greed. On Palm Sunday we will look at giving up popularity. On Easter morning we will look at giving up death. Today we look at giving up darkness. Our Gospel reading is John 3:1-5. Let me call this message *Give Up Darkness!*

John 3:1-5 Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. ²He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

³Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

⁴"How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"

⁵Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.

Albanian born Mother Teresa (1910-1997) once said, "*Many people mistake our work for our vocation. Our vocation is to love Jesus.*" That quote is worth remembering. If you can remember that quote say, "**Amen!**"

Fritz Kreisler (1875–1962) is considered one of the greatest violinists of all time. It was common for him to tour Europe. One day he was traveling to London from Hamburg, Germany. He was traveling by boat but had an hour before it sailed. To kill the time, he walked into the local music store. The proprietor asked if he could look at the violin Kreisler was carrying. He then vanished and returned with two policemen, one of whom was holding the violin, "You are under arrest." "What for?" asked Kreisler. "You have

Fritz Kreisler's violin." He responded, "I am Fritz Kreisler." They responded, "You can't pull that on us. Come along to the station." As Kreisler's boat was sailing soon, there was no time for prolonged explanations. Kreisler asked for his violin and played a piece he was well known for. "Now are you satisfied?" he asked. They were, and Kreisler performed in London on schedule. That story is about making a proper identity and so is this morning's scripture lesson. If you are ready to look at this morning's Gospel lesson say, "**Amen!**"

We find ourselves today in the third chapter of John. The story and the background are familiar. Nicodemus was one of that society's leading citizens. He was a Pharisee and a member of the Jewish Ruling council, also known as the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court of the Jewish faith. Regularly, people came to him to ask him questions about the law and to ask him how to solve their personal problems. Yet, in our reading for today, Nicodemus was the one with the question. He hoped Jesus had the answer. Our reading for today is a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus.

Through the ages much has been made about the timing of their discussion. According to verse two it was at night. Some say Nicodemus came at night to protect his reputation. How would it look for a leading member of the clergy to be seen talking to an itinerant preacher? Others say Nicodemus came at night because the day was complete. The two men could talk without interruption. You can make a case for both sides of the argument. However, you can also say the darkness of the night represented Nicodemus's spiritual condition. He is spiritually confused and in the dark. He is trying to answer that question everyone must asked, who is Jesus? He knew he had come from God because he had heard about Jesus' miracles, but what does that mean? Making a proper identification is extremely important, but it is not always easy to do.

You know it is true. Each one of us has an identity. The truth is each one of us has more than one identity. How many hats do you wear in life? Let me use myself as an example. I have been out at the mall and someone will walk up to me and say, "Aren't you the preacher?" I have married or buried one of their loved ones. You know me as your pastor. My parents knew me as their son. My sister knows me as their brother. Kathryn knows me as her husband. My children know me as father. My neighbors know me as the guy in the red house or the guy who is always walking his dog, the world's best dog, Macy. You get the point. Each one of us is an individual, but each one of us has several identities.

Today, I am going to ask you to identify Jesus. Some believe Jesus is just a fable from the past, like Paul Bunyan. Some believe Jesus was just a wise teacher or philosopher. Others believe Jesus is their ultimate friend, who believes in them when they don't believe in themselves. I hope you believe Jesus is more. Do you believe Jesus is the Christ? Do you believe Jesus is your Savior? Do you believe Jesus is your Lord? Who is Jesus? It's a hard question. That is why so many are living in the dark. This message

will dig into your soul and will force you to examine your ways. That is a good thing because this is the season of Lent. So, if you are ready to begin say, **"Amen!"**

Christ

Who is Jesus? Do you understand Jesus to be the Christ? One of the great stories in the Bible is Peter's confession. It is found in Matthew 16. Jesus asks the disciples the question, who do you say I am. He is hoping they identify him correctly. In verse 16 Peter does. He says, "Simon Peter said, "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God." The Hebrew word Messiah is the Greek word Christ. That verse is vital because for generations the Hebrews had been waiting for the Messiah. The problem is their understanding of the Messiah was all wrong. They understood the Messiah to be the great problem solver. There would be no corner of their lives that would not be improved once the Messiah came. When the Messiah came, there would be no more violence. When the Messiah came, there would be no more disease. When the Messiah came, no one would be oppressed. When the Messiah came, everyone would be well-fed and happy. When the Messiah came, their lives would be perfect. Do you know of anyone who is frustrated with Jesus because their problems remain? If you do, then you know someone who is living in Peter's generation. Listen to what I am about to say.

The word 'Christ' is a title. It is given to Jesus more than 700 times in the New Testament. The authors of the New Testament writings understood the sacredness of Jesus. He was not just another good person. He was the greatest person who ever lived. Do not take those words lightly. There are over seven billion people in the world today. I have no clue how many have lived in the world from the beginning of time. The total number of people is astronomical, but there has only been one Christ. His name is Jesus. He was the son of God; he was the incarnation of God. You know it is true. There is something about that name. If you have identified Jesus as the Christ say, **"Amen!"** Until you understand the true meaning of Christ, you are living in the dark.

Savior

Who is Jesus? Jesus is the Savior of the world! Is Jesus your Savior? I hope your answer is YES! The salvation of your soul depends on it. That is why Jesus came into the world. Do you remember the story? We tell the story annually. Mary and Joseph were betrothed to be married. Don't just jump over that phrase. In their world it meant a great deal. It meant they were legally bound, but she was still sexually innocent. Mary was a virgin, yet Mary was pregnant. Joseph was placed in a difficult situation. He decides to divorce her quietly, but one night he had a dream. In the dream, he was told to take Mary as his wife. The child in her womb is truly unique. This child will be the greatest life that ever lived. Matthew 1:21 says, *"She will give birth to a son and you will give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."* A savior is one who protects us from harm. If you have identified Jesus as your Savior say, **"Amen!"** Until you know Jesus as your savior, you are living in the dark.

Lord

Who is Jesus? Is Jesus your Lord? What does that mean? It can refer to two things. First, you can be describing the very nature of Jesus. For example, Jesus is the Lord, or Jesus is God. Second, you can be describing your relationship with Jesus. Jesus is your Lord or Jesus is your Master. When you are in bondage to someone, you must do what they say. Because, they are your Lord. How many people do you know understand Jesus as the Christ? How many people do you know have claimed Jesus as their Savior? How many people do you know that have grown deaf to their master's requests? They want Jesus as their Savior because they want to go to heaven. They haven't claimed Jesus as their Lord because don't want to change anything about their lives. Is Jesus your Lord and Savior? If that makes you think say, "**Amen!**" Until you know Jesus as your lord, then you are living in the dark.

Several years ago, my wife, Kathryn, had a wedding in the Cleveland area. The bride and groom were former Youngstown State University students, Katie and Ben. I didn't have any responsibilities at the wedding, so I got to play out my favorite role, the minister's husband. I love that role because it is undefined. You can do what you want. I did nothing but tag along. I went to the rehearsal and sat in the back pew of the church playing games on my cell phone. When the rehearsal was over, Katie's mother walked up to me and asked me if I was Kathryn's husband. I proudly said, "Yes." She said, "I have someone you have to meet. He looks just like you! He will be at the reception tomorrow." Prior to the wedding, Katie's mom walked up to me and said, "Have you seen someone who looks just like you? It is Katie's uncle." I said, "No!" We went to the reception and ate. As the dancing was about to begin, we decided to leave. We had an hour drive ahead of us and church in the morning. As I was putting my coat on when Katie's mom returned. She said, "Did you see him?" I said, "No!" She said, "Don't go any anywhere. You have to meet him because he looks just like you!" We promised to stay. I will admit I was a little nervous about meeting my double. I looked over the crowd and looked for someone who looked like George Clooney. I didn't see anyone, but I soon saw her return. She was dragging a man who looked like Rodney Dangerfield on steroids. His round face was round red, and his stomach was exploding over his tight belt. As proud as could be, she looked at us and said, "You two could be twins! Do you see it?" I smiled and said, "Yes!" Then, I shook his hand. I looked at him and said, "It is hard to believe there could be two handsome studs like us at the same reception." He sucked in his huge Texas size stomach and said, "I hope we don't intimidate these young guys!" It isn't just a story of identity, It's a question of identity. So, let me ask you the question one last time.

Who is Jesus? Unless, you understand Jesus to be the Christ and your Lord and Savior, you are living in the dark. Mother Teresa wasn't wrong. She once said, "*Many people mistake our work for our vocation.* Our vocation is to love Jesus." And all of God's people said, "**Amen**"