

# Fourth Sunday in Lent, Gospel Year B

## SIGNS OF LIFE . . . ETERNAL

**John 3:14-21**

**Fourth Sunday in Lent**

**Analysis by Fred Niedner**

*14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 17 "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19 And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. 20 For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21 But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."*

**DIAGNOSIS: Deadly Allure of Darkness**



***Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Bewildered, Longing for Respite***

We put in our time and get through our days, but we do our living at night. Our secret chronographs don't measure minutes and hours, or even distinguish AM from PM. Rather, they account for who's watching, assessing, judging. All day, critics lurk about. They're everywhere. They judge and condemn everything we do, say, and think. None of it ever proves good enough—not as citizens, in the workplace, or at home, among friends, in church, even in our love-making. Judgment never ceases. Some of the harshest critics live in our heads. Others claim to speak for The Critic. At times we concur, especially when we seek relief by joining the cacophonous choir of critics calling down

judgment on others. We can't make the critics, including our sniping selves, shut up. Our lives get consumed by judgment and judging, and it goes so quickly. In the end, is it all a God-damned waste? What finally matters? What, if anything, matters FINALLY?

### ***Step 2: Advance Diagnosis (Internal Problem) Loving the Darkness***

At night, alone and in the dark places of escape that we find or fashion, we are free. No one sees. No one judges. Here we find silence and peace. Yes, we love (eros) our lovers, and we surely love (philia) our friends. But oh, how we love (agape) and trust the darkness. It lets us be. It never judges or criticizes. Which is good, of course, except for the price. We must forfeit all companions and their judgments, and oftentimes consciousness itself, to find the embrace of darkness. The cost is profound, utter loneliness. Moreover, our silent lover's embrace is fleeting as any other cheap fix. The daylight, teeming with critics, always finds us. Then we run, again. The cycle never ends.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Condemned to Eternity with Our Beloved**

So long as we persist in leaving behind all others, except for their bodies, which we shamelessly use as props so we may find sweet solace in darkness, God need only let us go and leave us alone to see us utterly condemned, the children of perdition, born to be wasted (as John will later dub Judas, last seen in this Gospel going out into the night from which he has never returned). Convinced that hell is other people, and our haven is self-imposed abandonment, our beloved darkness will happily take us one way or another to have and to hold, in sickness and health. Not even death will part us.

## **PROGNOSIS: The Gift of Life Eternal—in the Light**



### ***Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Eternity with the One who Loves Us***

But God so loves the world—yes, the incorrigibly sniping and darkness-loving world—that God gave, and still gives, the Only-Begotten One, the Son, the Word made flesh, and planted, and still plants, that one, impaled on a pole, smack in the middle of the darkness, as Moses once raised a serpent on a stake in the wilderness so the dying, snake-bitten lovers of fault-finding and darkness might look, see, believe, and live. In love with the world, God did not send the Son to judge and condemn, but to lay down his life for his friends, give his life for straying sheep prone to wandering into the dark or following the seductive voices of thieving strangers. On his way toward

Jerusalem to be fixed on a pole and planted in the earth, he made stops like the one in Bethany, where he summoned an old friend out of the ultimate darkness he would soon enter himself. "Come forth!" he shouted. Then, "Unbind him from the graveclothes (a.k.a. baptismal garments, at least in this story) so he can walk." The inference: raised up and ready for work, he's coming with me.

### ***Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Believing in the One Lifted Up***

How do the dead hear and heed the call to come out from the darkness? The Spirit births them, daily, pushing and pulling them from the darkness, breathing new life in them, calling them to follow the Son, Jesus, the Christ, as he moves inexorably toward being lifted up, cross-high, giving his life for the world God loves and all its bewildered, benighted creatures. Following is believing, giving our hearts, staking everything we are, on his way, his truth, his life. And in believing, we have his life, know his truth, walk his way. We stumble. The darkness still beckons. But the Spirit never quits on us or gives us up to the darkness.

### ***Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): In God We Trust, Work, Live, Love***

Now we're planted everywhere, crucified with Christ, and posted all over along the roads to perdition, sometimes deep in the darkness, so others can see, believe, and live. Not because we're so cool-looking or aesthetically arresting as roadside art, but because the life we have received after our snake-bites and sojourns in the darkness isn't ours, but Christ's own. We aren't here as cautionary tales, and certainly not as angry billboards to judge all who pass by, but to offer friendship, embrace with compassion, grant forgiveness, lay down our lives

for anyone tempted to seek the empty, fleeting peace that darkness promises. Bound together in the community into which the Spirit daily births us, our “works” really are done “in God.” God can’t and won’t stop loving this world, can’t and won’t stop giving begotten ones, so the world might have love, light, and life eternal—life that matters—finally.