

**“Coming Out of the Dark”**  
**Northminster Presbyterian Church**  
**January 28, 2018**  
**Rev. Michael D. Kirby**  
**John 3:1-21**

Jade has lived under a shadow for the last four of her 17 years. She was 13 years old when she suffered an injury during her gymnastics training in Naperville. Everyone told her parents to travel to Michigan State. Their sports medicine team was world famous. The doctor for the US Olympic gymnastics team was there. A shadow of darkness fell across Jade’s life on that first visit for treatment by Dr. Lawrence Nassar.

One of the darkest chapters in American sports history reached a turning point in these last 10 days as Jade and over 125 other women aged 17 like Jade to their late 40s offered victim impact statements about their abuse at Nassar’s hands, from as early as 1992 to as late as 2016. For Jade, like many, a large part of the darkness that fell across her life was being both physically and emotionally abused but then not being believed. Young women have been reporting abuse by Nassar since 1999 but they were always discounted as not being able to tell the difference between treatment and sexual assault.

But for Jade and dozens like her being heard these last two weeks at the invitation of the judge in the case has been a transformative experience, even as it has also been re-traumatizing for many. In court, Jade faced Nassar and said, “I am no longer broken by you...Every day I will grow new strength.” Turning to the other brave young women gathered to be heard and believed at long last, she said: “We can walk free and radiate the strength that we have gained” from appearing together. Coming out of the dark, they are fully known, fully seen for the brave yet bruised heroines they are.

These past months, Jade and thousands upon thousands of women like her, who have been abused, harassed, assaulted and oppressed by powerful men, have been stepping out of the shadows of shame they never should have felt, out of deep shadows of being ignored or dismissed. They have been rising, proclaiming “time’s up” for the harassers and “me too” to their fellow survivors. It has been both shattering and inspiring to realize just how far we haven’t come as a society.

Hear me when I say that they and I know the difference between harassment and discrimination at work and the kind of physical and emotional abuse suffered by young women “treated” by Dr. Nassar. All of them have known what it is like to have their worth and their humanity diminished by those who did and should have known better.

In today’s text, Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the midst of the shadows, under cover of darkness as one who needs to know if this Jesus he’s been hearing about is worth his time and devotion. But because he is so controversial, Nicodemus only dares to do so under cover of darkness.

And Jesus does what he normally does in interviews; he takes over the questioning and begins to speak in riddles:  
You must be born from above to see the Kingdom of Heaven...

The Son of Man must be lifted up...  
This is because God so loves the world...  
That God would save the world from ourselves...

And this is the crisis; for that is the word which here is translated as judgement. It's literally the word "crisis" in Greek and it makes you wonder why they chose "judgement," which in our culture has a different connotation. This is the crisis — that the light has come. The light that is Christ has come. Now why is this a crisis? Because the light reveals the truth.

Have you read anything about the recent crises in the news departments and television studios around the world? The crisis was High Definition and now 4D High Definition, technology that captures so much more light and then projects that light much more clearly — as clear as the retina can possibly determine, so they say.

And the crisis? People looked too real; makeup looked too fake; every flaw was revealed, and the old ways of trying to cover up the flaws no longer worked. So they had to develop a whole new kind of makeup, airbrushed on, and most TV personalities now have to get facials at least every couple of weeks because everything shows.

That was the crisis of the light of Christ coming into the world, that coming out of the darkness everything would be revealed. All of our deepest darkest secrets, all of the dirty laundry and the undusted corners of every life would be laid bare.

And John, who we remember always wants us to have the end of this story in mind all the way through, would have us remember that this crisis ultimately killed Jesus. It sounds so ridiculous — people being afraid of being seen, being revealed for who they are — they couldn't stand it and were unwilling to surrender themselves to the love that would look at everything and say, "I know you, I love you still and I will bring you to new life." They had to kill him because they were so desperate to quench his light.

But notice, nowhere does Jesus say the people who flee the light succeed; those who will not place their trust in God's gracing love are condemned already because they have placed their faith in the false life, the false image that Christ's high definition love and honesty reveals to be nothing more than a bad makeup job of a life.

In this passage, Jesus goes from being the one who is being interviewed about his credentials to demonstrating he is the CEO of life. And he invites Nicodemus, just as he invites us, to come out of the dark — in John's words, to believe.

Remember, in Jesus' time, the word for belief did not have the same meaning we give it today. It was not professing the truth of a bunch of factual propositions; it was choosing sides; it was deciding in whom you would place your trust and faith. And so Jesus' statement that those who choose the side of the shadows makes sense. Those who have chosen not to stand with the light of God have chosen a place that leaves them condemned. But not in the same way that I think we've been taught. I was once taught that the message of John 3:16 is, believe in Jesus or go to hell. But I think that misses the point entirely.

How does Jesus start this conversation with Nicodemus? “You must be born from above.” This is translated by some as “born again.” So, here’s my question: what did you do to be born? What role did you play in your own birth? Last time I checked, nothing, not one thing. The one who gave you life did all the work. Ask any mother and she will confirm it.

Jesus comes into the world so that all the world might be saved; so that all the world might be born from above. It seems fairly obvious that Jesus, the giver of life, is capable of saving the world without us. But that doesn’t mean that we aren’t involved. As those who awaken to our understanding that we have been born from above, that we are not ultimately bound by the limits of our earthly abilities, but are bound up in God’s more-than-enough earthly love and power — we are invited into a new freedom, the freedom of knowing God’s love for us is stronger than anything we can imagine; that it is greater than our ability to comprehend, but at least it can be understood enough to free us from fear, free us from the feeling that if we were truly known, we would be found wanting.

Jesus’ assurances freed Nicodemus. At the end of this gospel, when Jesus is brought in for trial, the only Pharisee who calls for a fair trial is Nicodemus. After Jesus is crucified, the Pharisee who steps forward to assist in his burial and anointing is Nicodemus who, together with Joseph of Arimathea, sees to the needs of the fallen Messiah. He does not fear his colleagues’ wrath for he is standing in the light and is willing to be fully known.

This week we heard more stories of those who have celebrated being fully known. *The New York Times* published a series of brief interviews, profiles of some of the over 700,000 young people who were brought to the country illegally as children but who qualified for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program. They are now at risk as that program has been canceled. And Congress has been unable to pass legislation to protect them though everyone from 3/4 of Americans to the President and the leaders of both parties of both houses of Congress are on record supporting a legislative solution. As their stories become known, we find time after time they speak of the freedom the program gave them, allowing them to come out from the shadows, to seek their educations, to serve our military, to work and pay taxes, to save lives in the Houston floods this past summer, to finally be known for the valuable, beloved children of God they are (for God so loved the world,) to know that they are loved

This week was also the week that the Oscar nominations came out and among the nominees for best song is an anthem from the movie musical “The Greatest Showman,” which is about P.T. Barnum. The scene takes place at a fancy dress occasion where the so-called freaks from Barnum’s show have appeared dressed to the nines. But are shunned by the privileged folks at the event. After almost fleeing, the bearded lady character begins to sing:

*I am not a stranger to the dark,  
Run away they say, ‘cause we don’t want your broken parts.  
I’ve learned to be ashamed of all my scars...  
Run away they say, no one’ll love you as you are...*

That's the message Jesus came to dispel, the message Jade and so many like her have heard for decades. But the song goes on:

*I won't let them break me down to dust,  
I know that there's a place for us....for we are glorious....*

And still later:

*I am brave, I am bruised, I am who I'm meant to be...this is me....*

It's a powerful moment. I think the song is likely a favorite for the Oscar, but more than its place in the movie, I want us to hear how its words echo in Jesus' manifesto today: "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."

Like Nicodemus, like Jade and thousands of women like her, like the freaks in that song, coming into the light frees us as well; frees us to boldly stand with Jesus, to boldly step into the loving, gracing, transforming light that has come into the world and to bring our full, authentic selves — the good and the bad, the faithful and the blasphemous, the brave and the bruised. And it frees us to offer all to the light of Christ, knowing that this one who loves us enough to save us, loves us enough not to leave as we are, but calls us to let go of the parts of us that still dwell in the shadows; to fully claim the lives of love, grace, peace, hope and joy that God intends for us; to fully claim our identity as a community of faith committed to Christ and to changing the world in his name. May the light shine on us and through us now and forever. Amen.