

In the weekly magazine Time Out Chicago there is a section in each issue entitled “heard on the street.” It’s the first page I turn to every Wednesday when I pull it out of my mailbox. It’s funny. It’s a collection of random one-liners that people around Chicago heard “on the street” that week. They are ridiculously out of context, of course, and don’t make much sense.

But I feel like I could write this section. Not that I’m an eavesdropper or anything! But if you’ve ever been on the bus with the guy talking on his cell phone, you know that such bits are hard to ignore. We could extend this column to: heard on the El, heard at the coffee shop, heard at coffee hour. Of the bits and pieces of conversations I overhear during the week some of them are funny and I laugh out loud or text message a friend to share the humor and sometimes what I overhear is sad or even scary. All of it is confusing. And stringing together all these bits doesn’t even come close to a full sentence or thought. I can only imagine the stories that surround these phrases. Mostly I’m in the dark as to their actual meaning. Which, I guess, is part of the intrigue.

Should I get hired on at Time Out magazine some day, my first submission to “heard on the street” could be “heard in the Bible.” It might include such things as, “Just as Moses lifted up a serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” I haven’t overheard that one on the El Train yet, but it sounds almost as strange as an opening to our gospel text this morning. It feels a bit out of context, like we missed something. Which, we did. We are coming in mid-conversation. No wonder we feel in the dark trying to understand such a passage. Although having the privilege to go back in the story and overhear the parts that come before this doesn’t necessarily shed much more light.

But perhaps only hearing bits of conversations on the street and in the Bible isn’t the only time we feel confused and in the dark these days. Although we are enjoying the extra hour of sunlight later in the afternoon, those of you who get up earlier than people like me find yourselves stumbling around in the dark, both because you’re eyes are still waking up and because morning darkness is longer now.

We are also in these season of Lent, with its penitential darkness and the darkness of the cross looming, not the mention the darkness of missing the things you may have given up this season.

And although we tire of hearing about it, the conversation doesn’t seem to be over. The darkness of our economy. We don’t know where the bottom of the dark hole is, or if we’ve hit it. Some of us already feel at the bottom of it as we have lost our job or are working 3 people’s jobs because our 2 co-workers have already been laid off. Some of us feel the darkness of an unknown future as we have watched retirement savings dwindle. Or perhaps our darkness is the worry of such things that amazingly haven’t touched us yet.

We feel darkness in our personal lives too, with the death of a friend or loved one, with anxiety about our children, our aging parents, our own selves.

So, to shed some light, at least on the gospel story this morning, we should know a little more of the story. Like that it is by night, in the middle of darkness that Nicodemus comes to Jesus. He is the one Jesus is talking to in this third chapter of John. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews. He is not used to darkness. He knows the law inside and out. People rely on him to provide guidance and shed light on the ways of faith. But he comes to Jesus by night and engages him in conversation. They talk about being born from above, which further confuses

Nicodemus as his overactive left brain tries to conceive of entering the womb again. Our passage today is part of Jesus' response to Nicodemus' confusion.

But one has to wonder if Jesus' response to Nicodemus is shedding light, or further clouding his darkness.

So we stand in the middle of the night, the middle of this conversation, and the middle of the season of Lent. Dark, dark, and more dark. Historically and liturgically this 4th Sunday in Lent has some special names in various parts of the church. In some churches, especially Roman Catholic, this Sunday is known as Laetare Sunday, from the Latin word meaning "rejoice." Some of our Anglican friends call this Sunday, Refreshment Sunday. It seems strange to talk about rejoicing or refreshing mid-way through Lent, but as one author puts it, on this Sunday, the church seems to be saying, "lighten up a little."

Which is often what happens at the midpoint – we lighten up a little. A little more light comes in. Whether we are mid-way through a dark tunnel, seeing the first glimpses of light on the other side, or in the midst of tragedy, beginning to see the glimpses of light offering healing, forgiveness, and hope, or in the middle of a conversation, beginning to feel enlightened.

Ironically, Nicodemus comes in the middle of the darkness because he is searching for the light. And, what is even more real, the Light is coming to him. For God so loved the world that God sent the light of Jesus into the darkness of our night.

Our passage this morning contains perhaps the most well known Bible verse of all time. It's been called "the gospel in a nutshell." This verse is held up on posters at football games, memorized in confirmation classes, and, I just learned, thanks to Wikipedia, printed on the cups of In and Out Burger and on the bottom of Forever 21 shopping bags, and even added to the name of a wrestler. You know the verse. John 3:16. You've probably memorized it. Let's say it together. . . . *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

It's a beautiful passage that has had a lot of meaning to many of us. I remember memorizing it as a child before bed with my dad. But John 3:16 has also been taken out of context and has been used as a way of condemning those who don't believe, or at least believe as someone thinks they should. It's been used as a tool of darkness and evil during the crusades and the Holocaust, not to mention well meaning enlightened folks who worry about their neighbor perishing and offer more condemnation than love.

This week I was on the El Train as late afternoon light turned to dusk when a young man hopped on the train. He announced to those afternoon passengers, "I've been called to share a little good news with you all today." Most people didn't look up. "Next stop, Belmont" the announcer declared. The young man continued sharing various quotes "heard in the Bible" interspersed with his own life experiences of the darkness of gangs and drugs that had finally led him to God, and the testimony that his dark heart was now being given to God with joy and hope. His concluding remarks were that God has told him to warn people. Unless you believe in Jesus, you will perish. Just as quickly as he had appeared, he got off at the next stop.

John 3:16 is heard on the street plenty. But how many of us know John 3:17? *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.* The whole world, the cosmos. You can't get any wider or more expansive.

Into all of this world, the Light of Jesus came. To those of us in the dark, those of us enlightened, those of us sure, those of us confused, those of us in the middle, and those of us who

occupy all of these spaces. Into the midst of this world, God sent Jesus. And, with Nicodemus, in the middle of our night we come searching for this Light.

We would all like to be en-lightened. We welcome the light of summer days, the light of “aha” moments, the light of finally figuring something out, of feeling truly alive. But in the darkness of the night where this conversation is taking place, Jesus says to Nicodemus (and to us), “And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light....”

If I am honest, I have to admit that part of me does love darkness. Maybe you do, too. The light can be overwhelming, like the first time I got glasses and the whole world looked clear and bright and different and I could barely take it all in. Or the light that reveals things we would rather ignore – injustices that we’d rather be kept in the dark about, people we would rather remain hidden in the shadows, or even parts of our own selves we hope will never see the light of day. Darkness can be uniquely comforting, even alluring. And the light - - overwhelming.

Maybe it’s okay to be in the dark sometimes though, or to at least admit that’s where we are. This place where we don’t fully understand, only have bits and pieces out of context, feel lost and confused. This would be hard for Nicodemus to admit. He’s used to perfection, to having the answers, to knowing truth. Maybe that sounds like some of us, or at least what some of us think is expected of us. But in the *dark* is where Nicodemus encounters Jesus, not in the light.

But the light is there. In the opening to John’s gospel, he tells us, “the true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” The light *has* come into our world. Into the middle of our nights, the middle of Lent, the middle of conversations, the middle of our confusion and fear. In our love for darkness we may try to avoid the light, for fear of being vulnerable and exposed. We can choose to hang out in darkness, but the Light will enter in, will find us. “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it,” John writes.

Because that’s what light does. It shines in dark spaces – the dark spaces of our world, the dark spaces of our hearts, and even the dark spaces of a cross and tomb – and transforms them. And this is the Light that turns night to day, winter to spring, Lent to Easter. And it can even lighten *us* up a little.
