

March 10, 2024 (Lent 4 B)

John 3:19-21

“Heliophobia”

You all know what a “phobia” is – right? Have you ever heard of **heliophobia**? It is an illogical, irrational, and crippling FEAR of **sunlight**. It’s not very common, but it is a real condition. In some cases it’s caused by a really bad sunburn experience, or an inflated fear of skin cancer, but very often the cause is completely unknown. This is not the same as “photophobia” – where light causes physical pain, because something is wrong in the eyes, the optic nerves, or in the brain that processes it. Heliophobia is not rational – but it is an **emotional** reaction that is real, and causes some people to avoid the sun at all costs.

I’m going to be talking about something similar today – not a fear of the **sun** in the sky, but a FEAR of the **Son of God**. We love Jesus – and we’re here to spend time with Him in Word and Sacrament; to thank and praise Him for His love, grace, forgiveness, and truth. It’s tough for us to understand how people could be afraid of HIM – but we’re going to try and learn more about that fear today.

Keep in mind it is illogical / irrational / it makes no sense – but you can see the results of this crippling fear **everywhere** in the world, and down through history – right back to the beginning. **Adam and Eve** tried to HIDE from God in the Garden. It was not a logical thing to do – it was an emotional reaction.

In our outreach and evangelism – we trust in the power of the Gospel and the Holy Spirit bring repentance and faith, but we also use logic, facts, and science to explain the Christian Faith in a way that makes sense to our human brains. All of nature clearly points to an Almighty and Transcendent Creator – DNA / irreducible complexity / the brilliance and diversity of life on our planet / the fine tuning of the universe / the human conscience and universal voice of morality / etc. In the religious realm – Biblical Christianity stands apart as the only one that could be universally true. You have concrete and specific historical prophecies – and fulfillment – that is proof of God’s supernatural intervention. The Biblical account of history is the only one that adequately explains all the evidence that we can scientifically examine in our world. The plan of salvation is brilliant in its scope, simplicity, and power – God had to become one of us to save us. His death had to atone for the guilt of the world – it had to be public, and so did the resurrection. We need multiple eye-witness accounts, and God

has given us all that we need in His written Word, which He tells us is accurate and true – even in the smallest details. Having that – we can quite easily see what *teachings* out there in Christianity conform to the Word, and which do not – leaving Confessional Lutheran theology as the clearest and most accurate exposition of God’s pure Truth.

I’ve walked this spiritual journey with many people over the years – and, sometimes people ask: *“If it’s so **obvious** and logical – that Christianity is true and every other religious system is wrong – then why isn’t everyone a Christian? If it’s so **clear** that Confessional Lutheran theology perfectly fits the Biblical teachings – why aren’t people flocking to conservative Lutheran churches?”*

It doesn’t make any sense – until – you discover this condition of **spiritual heliophobia!** Or – maybe we should call it “Jesophobia” (fear of Jesus), or “Aletheiaphobia” (fear of the Truth), or “Logophobia” (Fear of the Word of God). It’s not rational at all, it has nothing to do with LOGIC – it’s an **emotional reaction!** People run away from the Light and Truth of God. They FEAR it . . . and HATE it – sometimes with a visceral reaction.

Jesus is going to tell us **why** in our text for today. Our Lord gave **Nicodemus** a simple, clear, and (you could say) logical explanation of God’s plan of salvation. God LOVED the world so much that He gave us His Son. It was God’s plan all along – it’s Biblical, and the Old Testament is full of prophecies about it. He mentions the history of Moses and the bronze snake in the desert – and shows him how God was foreshadowing what He would accomplish for humanity in Christ. It’s real, solid, historical – and even (in a sense) LOGICAL (of course, God’s logic is higher, deeper, and more pure than ours, but we *can* grasp the basics) – He would save us ALL from sin, and bring salvation to us individually by faith alone. *So . . . why was this not obvious to the religious leaders of Israel, who knew the history and the Scriptures so well?* Well . . . Jesus explains what the issue really was: **John 3:19–21** (NIV 11)

19 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. 20 Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. 21 But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

Jesus brilliantly explains the terrible, irrational, and crippling FEAR that human beings have as a result of sin. From the Garden of Eden, to the toddler hiding behind the couch because he got into mom’s

lipstick and made a mess, to the criminals hiding out from the Law, to our natural reaction to **hide** our true selves and put on a mask for all the world to see . . . Jesus diagnoses the problem in 3 ways we can examine here in these verses:

1. ***Light came into the world, but – people loved the darkness more.***
Black and white timeless morality, clarity about spiritual realities, the righteous standards and teachings of a Holy God . . . are just too SCARY! The murky grey of the shadows is a lot more appealing. Let's not talk about it. Let everyone have their own opinion. Let's keep God / religion out of the public square and out of public education entirely. Let's not bring it up with family or discuss it over the dinner table. Let no one judge anyone else's moral or religious convictions. *"Ahh – that's a wonderfully comfortable place to be!"*
Why?
2. ***Because their deeds are evil.*** The word Jesus uses here means: sick, twisted, perverted, spoiled, rotten, morally contaminated. Nobody wants their wicked, greedy, selfish, perverse and rotten behavior put on DISPLAY – it's much more comfortable in the shadows, where we can hide – and, if everyone is in the darkness, we'll feel better that way. Jesus goes on to explain using a different Greek word for "evil" here:
3. ***Everyone who does / practices evil [that is: people clinging to corrupt, careless, trivial, thoughtless and worthless behavior] hates the light, and will not come into it.***

This is an emotional act of the WILL – we are not dealing with clear rational thinking or logic here. People *desire* murkiness in religion and morality. They *want* all religion to be a matter of personal preference, and all Christian doctrine to be a matter of personal interpretation. That's what they CHOOSE and INSIST upon – *why?*

For **FEAR** that their life and deeds would be **rebuked** (our translation says: exposed). Nobody wants to be wrong – and nobody wants to be told that what they believe, what they love, what they do, what they consider important . . . is a lie / foolish / misguided / trivial. So . . . we'll sit here in the darkness instead. Shut the light off, and leave everyone well enough alone.

But – God **LOVES** people and He wants us all in His family forever. Can you see how brilliant God's **plan** was to have us human beings be the ones to lead others out of the darkness – into His glorious Light? Could you imagine God doing this work Himself – people would be screaming in terror and fright, worse than tossing someone with a fear of heights out on the ledge of a skyscraper. He's not going

to force us – likewise He couldn't have the angels do it either – it has to be us Christians.

Why us – because we understand. We come from the darkness. We still have a sinful nature – part of us that loves the darkness and is terrified of God / terrified of genuine, open, **repentance**. Many people (maybe even most people) in our own church are afraid to tell their pastor what is really going on in their hearts and lives. Hey – *I get it!* I sometimes get an email from our circuit pastor asking how everything is going here in my life and ministry. I'm with you – I reply: everything is fine. Thanks! I don't want to tell him what my personal struggles and challenges / fears and temptations are – *no thanks!*
Opening up our own hearts is a terrifying thing – even for us Christians.

The Holy Spirit is the one who actually brings us to logical common sense here: God knows it all already. You can't hide from Him. Creep out into the Light – and find warmth / love / grace / mercy / blood-bought forgiveness – guilt disappears – and we understand: those other Christians are sinners too; I don't have to hide myself from them either. What a beautiful and liberating thing it is – to set aside fear, and step out into the LIGHT. We saw that at the Grow Conference where the pastor / presenter was candid about his own struggles with pornography.

God doesn't forcibly drag us out of the darkness – kicking and screaming – He patiently invites us, as He did with Nicodemus. Likewise, be patient with others. Encourage them. Tell them your own experience, warts and all. Invite them. Take them by the hand and walk with them into the Light. Salvation is FREE – but it's still a bit scary for each one of us – for it may **cost us everything**. We don't know what price Nicodemus paid, when he took down Jesus' body, and stepped out publically as *His* follower. We don't know much it'll cost us either – but, it's all worth it! Fear . . . dissolves. Guilt . . . gone. Sin . . . forgiven. Heaven . . . ours. Life . . . now full of meaning and purpose, doing the things God prepared in advance for us to do. It's all Him, and anything good we do is because of His grace and power.

Understand **Jesus' diagnosis** here – for your own hearts, when that old irrational fear returns. Run back to the Light of Christ. Understand it as you and I together try our best to lead others into the Light as well – may God give us wisdom, unity, strength, and patience with those poor souls living in darkness – because we've been there, but we've also met the Son of God and felt His warm embrace in the LIGHT – and there is, quite frankly, nothing better!