

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

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John 8:12–19

Guide us, O God, by your Word, and Holy Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover peace, through Christ our Lord, Amen.

We come near to the conclusion of our sermon series on the “I Am” statements of Jesus in the Gospel of John. As I mentioned in the first week, the declaration of “I am” tells us a lot about God, and about Jesus, and about us. We have explored Jesus declaring that he is the gate, the way the truth and the life, the vine, and the Good Shepherd. Next week we will look at Jesus’ declaration of himself as the “Bread of Life”. This week we hear, “I am the light of the world.” The reading comes from the 8th chapter of John, verse 12 through 19. Listen for a word from God.

12 Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” 13 Then the Pharisees said to him, “You are testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is not valid.” 14 Jesus answered, “Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid because I know where I have come from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going”. 15 You judge by human standards; I judge no one. 16 Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is valid; for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me. 17 In your law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is valid. 18 I testify on my own behalf, and the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf.” 19 Then they said to him, “Where is your Father?” Jesus answered, “You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also.”

Light and darkness is a metaphor that is strong in almost any epic story. There is the force of Star Wars, and the battle between good and evil, and the pull on Luke Skywalker to turn to the dark side of the force. There is light in dark imagery in literature. The world of Harry Potter is a battle between good and dark magic. There are the white hats and black hats of the old west. And as a quick aside – I understand that this is not always a helpful metaphor when that which is dark is always associated with evil – and that the prevalence of this very metaphor has contributed to racist attitudes by some – and it is worth considering our language and metaphors. It can also be helpful to highlight those things about darkness that are good. Our bodies and our ecosystems need the dark. It is good for our sleep and regeneration. The darkness of a sky lets us see the magnificence and brilliance of the stars. The darkness of the womb nourishes life. Darkness heightens other senses. Darkness is not the opposite of good, or a barrier to God. Psalm 139:12 describes God’s response to darkness: *“Indeed, the darkness shall not hide from you, but the night shines as the day; The darkness and the light are both alike to you”*. Again, as we have seen these past many weeks, it becomes important to expand our language, the metaphors, and names we use for God so that not one image is favored or so that we do not continue damage.

Light, then, becomes one of several metaphors – not the primary metaphor, even as it is seen throughout literature and stories.

The image of God as light, or Jesus as light, is used frequently in scripture, and particularly in the gospel of John. John seems to use the images of light and dark, along with blindness and the ability to see, in a way to highlight a deeper spiritual meaning. The late theologian, Marcus Borg, talks about the metaphor of light and dark when he says, “The symbolism of light and darkness is ancient, archetypal and cross-cultural. It has many rich resonances of meaning. Darkness is associated

with blindness, night, sleep, cold, gloom, despair, lost-ness, chaos, death, danger and yearning for the dawn. It is a striking image of the human condition. Light is seen as the antidote to the above and is thus an image of salvation. In the light, one is awake, able to see and find one's way; it is associated with relief and rejoicing that the night is over; in the light one is safe and warm. In the light there is life”.

The story of the Bible can almost be seen as a movement from darkness to light. “Let there be light,” are the first words of God and the first creative act in the book of Genesis. God brings forth the light from the chaos of the darkness. The book of Revelation ends with a description of the new heaven and new earth – “there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light.” Scripture continually declares and affirms that wherever God is – there is light.

As with all the “I Am,” statements, the words of Jesus saying, “I am the light of the world” is set in a particular context. And this context is a little different than other times when we hear Jesus is the light. When I hear Jesus as light, I most often think of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, in his sermon on the mount, where his disciples and other followers are surrounding Jesus as he preaches and teaches, and he declares that we are the light of the world. That it is our job to take on the mantle of Jesus and go to be light in the world. But in the Gospel of John, Jesus is not talking to his disciples, instead he is talking to the religious authorities, those that he is often in opposition toward – or, at the least, those who are in opposition to Jesus. “ ‘I AM the light of the world’ is first for those who question it and condemn it. It is first for those who refuse it and reject it. It is first for those who, even if they don’t know it, need to hear it the most.”

There is a festival that is going on at the time that Jesus declares he is the light of the world. In the chapter preceding the reading, we are told that the Feast of the Tabernacles has just ended. The Feast of the Tabernacles was celebrated in the Fall to commemorate the journey of the Israelites through the wilderness after leaving Egypt. Within the festival there was a special night called the Grand Illumination. Giant torches were lit around the temple, so that all of Jerusalem was lit up. This was the opening night of the festival. On the closing night of the festival all of the torches would be lit, except for one. This was to symbolize that the hoped for messiah had not yet appeared. It is in this context that Jesus says, “I am the light of the world.”

We don’t know for sure on what night Jesus would have made this statement – but the context of the festival is clear that Jesus is making a statement. On the one hand, it’s possible that Jesus would be making the statement that he is the hoped for messiah. He is the torch that is currently not lit, but that will illumine the whole world and fulfill hopes. On the other, with all the torches lit, and the entire city illuminated, it’s possible that Jesus would be making a reference to the pillar of fire that the Israelites followed on their journey, which the festival commemorated. And in some sense, I think both of these ideas can be held together. Jesus represents the hope for future and is also the light that guides us on our path.

As I mentioned the first week – the “I am” statements of Jesus are unmistakably a reference to the God who appears to Moses in the burning bush and declares “I am who I am.” This holy name of God has caused consternation for many translators through the years – there is not a precise way in which to translate the name from the Hebrew. Some have translated the holy name of God as – “I am who I am,” or “I will be who I will be,” but according to one scholar, another translation may be “I will be there.” God says to Moses, who is full of excuses and doubt,

“as you move forward, I will be there.” God’s promise to Moses, and to us, is that as we move along our journey, God will be there.

Jesus then is the hope that God will be there and is also the light that illumines our path. One preacher talks about having a flashlight faith on the journey of faith. Think about how a flashlight works for a moment. It’s a small personal device, meant to illumine just enough so you can see a little bit ahead of you. You take one camping when you will be out at night and where there will be no light. You have one somewhere in your home in case the electricity goes out. The flashlight is not meant to shine and brighten the entire room – rather it’s meant to illuminate just enough so you can see the next few steps ahead. It doesn’t show you the end of the destination but only the next steps.

A flashlight-faith is trusting Jesus to illuminate the next few steps. It doesn’t mean you see the whole thing before you, you may not see the end destination or where you end up, but you trust just enough to see the next steps. The light of Christ reminds us that even in the small steps that make up the whole journey, Jesus is there. It allows us to not worry about the destination as much as listen for directions and take the next step forward.

Maybe that next step forward is to take a step toward reconciliation with someone. You can’t see the end, but you take that step and say sorry. Or maybe it’s a step toward honesty and speaking the truth or asking someone to own up to the hurt they have caused. Maybe it’s a step toward using a gift that you haven’t dared use before. A flashlight faith gives you trust to take one step at a time. The path of faith requires many steps – but you can only make them one step at a time. The example and teaching of Jesus gives us light to illumine our path. We also remember God’s promise to Moses and to us in the “I am,” with God’s promise of “I will be there.”

One other nuance to the festival is important to note. Not only was this particular festival full of celebration, it was also full of tension. In the chapter before, when we are told about the festival, we are also told that the council of religious leaders is meeting. Typically, the council would not meet on the Sabbath or during festivals – and yet, they are meeting. They are meeting because they are plotting Jesus’ death.

One of these leaders was Nicodemus who had earlier come to Jesus under the cloak of night to have conversations with him. Some speculate that Nicodemus came by night because he was scared – maybe he was scared because he could not question the faith in the light of day – but he came because he was curious about Jesus’s new teaching. It is during the meeting when the council are plotting to kill Jesus that Nicodemus stands up for Jesus. Perhaps the encounter with Jesus allows Nicodemus to begin to see a new understanding of the faith and allows him to begin to change his faith. The third and last time we see Nicodemus in the gospel of John is when he goes with Joseph of Arimathea to prepare Jesus’s body for burial, but this time in the full light of day.

I imagine that was a difficult journey of faith for Nicodemus. After all, he was one of those leaders who Jesus was calling out. And Nicodemus had to know that if he stepped out in a new way with the other leaders, he would not be received well. It is far easier to testify to the light that shines in the darkness when you are pretty sure those listening to you will like what it is you have to say. When you have willing listeners. “It’s far more difficult to give witness to Jesus as the light of the world when you are certain your witness will be rebuked and, in the end, rejected.”

Sometimes when we listen for that next step, it also means we must be open to a new idea or new understanding of faith. This can be scary and requires courage. New ideas or new understandings, especially

something that is held as sacred, is challenging – and it takes a lot of courage to say, “maybe I have more to learn here,” or, “I was wrong and maybe God has more light to shed for me on this matter.” And it takes even more courage than that to confront others with this new truth when you know they won’t like what it is you have to say.

When we listen to God, and when we listen to others’ experience, particularly those who have otherwise been left out or pushed aside, God may bring new understanding.

“I am the light of the world,” Jesus says. “I am here with you,” Jesus is saying – here with you as you journey in faith, as you seek new understanding, as you seek the new step. Even when it’s hard. Seek to walk in the light, and to be light.

Amen.

¹ Karoline Lewis, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching-series/the-call-to-i-am-a-five-part-lenten-series>

¹ https://www.swnewsmedia.com/savage_pacer/news/opinion/columnists/spiritual-reflections-a-flashlight-kind-of-faith/article_a31c0f0c-2b9c-512b-bf9e-c6e6deedecb9.html

¹ Lewis