

I AM: Building a Christ-Centered Church *Light of the World*

John 8:12

February 4, 2024

It is *not* my usual practice to preach a sermon on a single Biblical verse. In seminary, I was taught that this was unwise at best, and potentially dangerous. And here's why: all of scripture exists in context, and understanding its context is essential to making sense of the passage. Much of the time, I agree with and follow this guidance from my professors. Today, however, as we continue our sermon series on the "I am" statements of Jesus, I want to center our worship in one simple phrase.

First, the context. The setting of this passage is the city of Jerusalem during the Feast of the Tabernacles. The festival was in celebration of God's liberation of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt. At the Feast of the Tabernacles, in the courtyard of the temple, there are lampstands. Picture them. Each one eighteen feet high, holding four huge bowls filled with oil. During this festival, at dusk, priests would climb the ladders eighteen feet high and light those giant bowls of oil. And when they did, the lampstands would light up all of Jerusalem. In fact, one ancient writer records the light was so bright that the glow in the sky could be seen from fifty miles away.

This is where and when Jesus makes a stunning claim. **"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."** This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

From beginning to end, the presence and power of light radiates through the Gospel of John in the life of Jesus. At the outset, we are put on notice. "In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." The presence of light and the reality of darkness coexist in John's gospel, just as they did in the ancient world.

Unlike our ancestors, we have some control over the amount of literal light in our lives. When our family first moved from Atlanta in the summer of 2018, I remember being struck by how late the sun set here. I assure you, it is not easy to put young children to bed when it still feels like the middle of the day. And so, heavy, dark curtains were an early purchase for our new home and our boys' bedrooms. Then, winter came, and it felt like weeks went by with no hint of sunlight. (Can you relate?) A new purchase for our home: bright lights, called therapy lamps, meant to imitate the ultraviolet rays of the forever absent sun. On Friday morning, I woke in the predawn hours, and I couldn't get back to sleep. And so, I counted the sources of light I could see from my bed. *Seven*. Chargers and power strips, watches and phones, nightlights and exterior spots reflecting through the windows. It is easy for us to assume that light is something we control.

At the Festival of the Tabernacles, the temple was literally lit up—light shining in actual darkness. This is the moment when Jesus stands in the temple courtyard and says, "I am the light of the world." The words are carefully chosen. The Greek word here is *cosmos*. I am the light of the universe, the light of the galaxy. Jesus is not speaking of a flashlight or a lamp. His words are *meant* to raise eyebrows and spark reflection. Jesus speaks of himself as the light shining in a world of shadows. He promises that all who follow him will walk in the light of life. It is a promise they—we—need to hear. It is a promise they—we—want to believe. We *yearn* for light. We *long* for light.

I was reminded this week by a colleague that Epiphany is not a single day but a *season* of light. This comment brought to mind my favorite Epiphany

story from Second Church. It was a couple of weeks before Christmas. The year was 2020, and I received a voicemail from Stewart Goodwin, an elder in our congregation and Executive Director of the Indiana War Memorial. I called Stewart back. You might know that Stewart Goodwin is also a retired brigadier general and so very good at getting straight to the point. "Pastor," he said, "I need a religious perspective on a situation we're facing." Well, he had my attention now. Stewart explained that the downtown Indianapolis business community had made a request of the War Memorial that the huge Christmas tree at the center of Monumental Circle, which is owned and managed by the War Memorial, would remain illuminated beyond Christmas, in fact well into the new year, 2021. These local leaders felt that this would provide a ray of hope in a time when many were struggling as new waves and variants of COVID took hold and uncertainty seized us all.

Stewart's question for me was simple. Does our faith tradition have any wisdom to offer or, more to the point, regulations to follow regarding the lighting of Christmas trees? After all, it is a *Christmas* tree. And so, the concern was: would the symbol lose its meaning, lose its power, if it was left to shine once the holy day had ended? We talked for a few moments, and it occurred to me that what follows Christmas in the liturgical calendar is Epiphany—the season of light, the celebration of light. It further occurred to me that the light of Christ shines in the darkness all year long and shines best when it is needed most. I called Stewart back just before Christmas to ask what had been decided. "Well, Pastor," he said. "I think you'll like the decision we made. The 'Shining a Light' production has been extended for several weeks." Stewart, it was the right choice—a witness to the reality that all of us need a little more light in our lives.

The gospel writer John wants us to know the power of light shining in darkness. He knows we're going to need that power. He knows we're going to need that promise. Jesus is preparing his disciples for the darkness to come. His death and departure from them.

He promises that the light they find in him will never be extinguished even when his life is ended.

Over in Matthew's gospel, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus turns the image around in words to his disciples. "*You* are the light of the world. Let your light so shine that others will take notice of your good deeds and give glory to God." It is a profound responsibility placed on the shoulders of disciples. It belongs to us.

You see, from the beginning of our movement, followers of Jesus were not asked to blend in but to stand out. Members of our confirmation class, you are called to be children of light who shine like stars in the night sky. You were not meant to blend in. You are called to stand out.

I feel an urgency in that command—perhaps you noticed—as I consider *our* context. Yes, we have many sources of artificial light, but few signs of the light of life. The question is: how can *we*, people of Christian faith, reflect the light of Christ and shine *our* light in the world? I have found that we do it best when we do it together.

Eight days ago, on a very gloomy and gray winter Saturday morning, I stopped by the church between our boys' basketball games. And what I found here were bursts of light as bright as lampstands filled with gallons of oil. I walked into the sanctuary, where our handbell ensemble was preparing to play in worship the next day and would soon be followed by rehearsal for the brass and organ concert. I then walked down the hall, where a family was gathering in prayer to celebrate the faithful life of a saint who has joined the church triumphant in death. In one room around the corner, a group of women were gathered for Bible study. And then I walked down the stairs, and on the second floor, a large group of men had gathered for the second day of a retreat focused on living their lives with intention. Just above them, volunteers were learning from our Children and Family Ministries staff about the beautifully tangible practice of Godly Play and teaching the faith to our children. And downstairs around the corner, in the hallway, and all the way wrapped around

a second corner, folks were waiting to be welcomed and served in our food pantry. There was a team of a dozen volunteers ranging in age from teenagers to folks in their eighties. They were busy inside, serving and preparing. As they waited, neighbors outside shared stories. I watched as children played together on the floor. Signs of support and solidarity flowed from these encounters. I witnessed words of encouragement, prayers said aloud, nods of understanding, laughter, and tears. When I walked back outside, the day had not changed at all, but I was filled with light because I received it here, filled with gratitude for what happens in this place on a single Saturday. In a few moments, we'll begin our annual meeting of the congregation. You will hear and read stories of the impact and ministry of Second in 2023 and some of our aspirations and prayers for the year that has already begun.

Here's what I hope. I hope you see flickers of light as you look across this space and listen to those stories. I hope you get some understanding, some grasp of just how important your light is to this witness and this work. Yesterday afternoon, in this space, we celebrated the life of a saint of our church, Sally Anderson, who was a member of this congregation for eighty years. She shined God's light with beauty and with grace, and that is your call too.

Now I know it's no secret and should come as no surprise that many see dark clouds on the horizon as they look to the months and years ahead. It might feel difficult to see anything beyond a swirling chaos, the growing despair, the fog in which we often live. And I confess that some days I give into it. I confess that some days I feel that way too. But then, often enough, some encounter, some experience of grace, reminds me that the promise is true, the light will never be extinguished. Hope sees best in the dark.

Back in November, when the email arrived inviting children to sign up for the Christmas Eve service, Sara and I talked to our boys about what role they might like to fill. Samuel is our fourth grader, and he was eager for a speaking part. The boy likes a microphone and a stage

(and I don't know where that comes from). The surprise came when Benjamin, first grade, asked if maybe he could be an usher. We asked the service leaders. *Of course he can.* That morning, trained by the very best, our own Brad Yarger, Ben dressed in his very best church clothes. He came early to prepare. He handed every worshiper who came through his line a bulletin and a candle. He offered them sheep's ears or an angel halo. And as each one walked into the sanctuary, he said, "Merry Christmas." And then, the service began, and into the service, his big moment came.

Ben, with just a little help and on his tip toes, lit his candle from the Christ candle at the center of the Advent wreath, and he began walking down the aisle to share the light of Christ with his church. Someone snapped a picture that became my enduring image of Christmas this year...and Epiphany...and our call in the months ahead.

You see, the light that we welcomed that Christmas morning, the light that filled this sanctuary on Christmas Eve, it has not gone out, but it has gone *on*. If you want to be people who follow Christ, you're going to have to follow his light into the uncertainty of an unknown future. We're going to have to trust to the tips of our toes that the promise is true. We're going to need to remind each other that hope sees best in the dark.

So, my pastoral advice: keep those lights up in your yards, in your homes, in your hearts. Keep those candles lit, for Jesus Christ is the Light of the World, and you are meant to shine. Amen.