

Sermon Series: Summer Reading

Sermon Title: Being Light

John 8:12-20

by Jeff McClain

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A couple years ago around Christmas time I was driving my family home one evening. All the sudden from the back seat, my daughter Anne, who was three at the time, made a wonderful observation. She said, "Daddy, it's dark outside. But that's ok because the darkness won't last forever." She didn't realize it at the time, but she had just given me a great Christmas present – that comment turned into my Christmas Eve homily that year!

We're obviously a long way from Christmas, but her words still ring true in June. After all, it sure has seemed dark outside lately, hasn't it? This past week the news was filled with images and audio of children in cages crying out for their parents, from whom they'd been separated. It's dark outside, all right. Regardless of our politics, as human beings we simply must be better than that! And as Christians even more so, since we're called to love our neighbors, and **"Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling the law."** (Romans 13:10)¹

Lately I've felt like I need to be at church in worship more than ever. If for nothing else than to hear a better story, an alternative narrative to the ones we hear the rest of the week. To hear a story of hope and possibility, one that says we're called to a better way of being in the world. To be reminded that because of Christ, the darkness won't last forever. I need to hear more of that story, on Sundays and always.

As we continue our summer reading series in the gospel of John, I invite you to read John chapters 8-10 this week. But today we're only going to focus on one verse – God's answer to all the darkness of the world. Hear this word from John chapter 8 verse 12.

John 8:12 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."

This is the word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God.**

Jesus says, "I am the light of the world." In a world full of darkness, it's good to be reminded of that truth today.

As we make our way through the gospel of John this summer, pay attention to how the gospel writer makes the case that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God, sent to save the world. John talks about many of Jesus' signs that prove his identity – water to wine, feeding 5000, raising Lazarus

¹ On screen please: Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling the law. (Romans 13:10)

from the dead, etc. But John also speaks about Jesus' identity in theological metaphors. Today's verse is the second of several I AM statements in John's gospel. Last week Vern preached on "I am the bread of life." Next week we'll hear Jesus say, "I am the good shepherd." Our former senior pastor Jason Byassee will be here preaching that one. These I AM statements harken back to the Old Testament where God revealed God's self to Moses.

The story is told in Exodus 3. Moses is tending sheep when all of the sudden God shows up in a burning bush that didn't burn up – a curious light if ever there was one. God says to Moses, "I have heard the cries of my people in Egypt, and I have come to deliver them. Go tell Pharaoh to let my people go." After stammering around and making excuses Moses asks, "Who should I say sent me?" **God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM."**² Tell them I AM sent you. That's the first time in scripture that God's name is revealed – I AM. The name is comprised of four Hebrew letters, and it's sometimes pronounced Yahweh or maybe Jehovah. Some believe it's such a holy name that it shouldn't even be spoken at all. When it's printed in the OT it shows up as the "LORD" in all capital letters. That's the divine, holy name of God – I AM.

When Jesus says "I AM..." in John's gospel, John is making a Christological claim. Jesus is identifying with the God revealed to Moses – the great I AM who delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt. John's gospel boldly proclaims that Jesus and I AM are one in the same. In Jesus, I AM is still in the business of delivering God's people from slavery to sin, death, and darkness. I AM the light of the world, Jesus says.

Scripture frequently mentions the contrast between light and darkness. Sometimes darkness refers to a void, or nothingness, like the world at the beginning of the creation story. Sometimes darkness refers to evil. The entire earth went dark as Christ hung on the cross. Sometimes darkness is synonymous with spiritual blindness or a failure to understand what it means to be human.³ Sometimes being in darkness is about having lost one's way.

Losing our way in the darkness can be a scary thing. Last week my wife and kids and I drove to Michigan to spend time with my family. One night we had my sister's kids over for a slumber party. When we were about to go to bed we turned off the lights, and my niece suddenly became very afraid. But my daughter Anne immediately reassured her in the darkness, "It's gonna be ok! Just wait a second and your eyes will adjust. You'll be able to see again soon." A couple nights earlier we'd plugged in a night light that kicked in only once it became dark enough in the room. Anne knew that because of the night light, eventually all would be well. Like she said a couple years earlier, it's dark, but that's ok because the darkness won't last forever.

² On screen please: God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." Exodus 3:14

³ From Adam Hamilton's *John: The Gospel of Light and Life*, chapter 1 (location 160 in ebook)

It's easy to lose our way in the darkness, and that's a scary place to be. Darkness looks different for each of us. It might be getting stuck in harmful behaviors or addictions or unhealthy relationships. It could be brought on by depression or some other kind of illness. Sometimes we might just find ourselves completely weighed down by the polarizing and divisive political climate. When we're in the darkness, we often feel alone and isolated. That's a dangerous place to be because that feeling of being alone often makes us retreat even further into the darkness. Sometimes it's like we're being drawn into a pit we just can't escape. In those moments we need to be reminded that we're not alone. And it only takes the tiniest bit of light to chase the darkness away. The darkness won't last forever.

Throughout the bible God brings light into the darkness. **1 John 1:5 says "God is light and in him there is no darkness at all."**⁴ In the beginning, the first thing God created was light to dispel the darkness and provide order and rhythm to life. God then led the Israelites to the promised land with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. God was the original night light! And God's light led the way to new life.

There's an entire Jewish festival that commemorates God lighting the way.⁵ The Festival of Booths is a time when practicing Jews pitch a tent in their back yard to remember being led out of Egypt and into the Promised Land by the light of God. During Jesus' time, the Festival of Booths culminated with an elaborate lighting of the temple. Massive bowls filled with oil and thousands of wicks were lit and placed at the four corners of the temple. The light could be seen for miles, which was quite a unique experience of light in the ancient world, before electricity.

Interestingly, in John chapter 7 the gospel writer tells us that the Festival of Booths is drawing near. So this festival is the backdrop for Jesus' I AM claim in chapter 8. As the Jewish temple was literally lighting up the world, Jesus steps onto the scene and announces, "I am the light of the world!" What a profound declaration! Way to make an entrance, Jesus – pyrotechnics and everything! In that moment, as they're remembering the I AM, the God whose light saved them, Jesus says I AM that God, and I AM the light of your salvation once again.

Sometimes I wish Christians had more festivals, so we could be reminded more regularly about God's saving light. I'd love to see huge bowls of fire at the corners of our church, lighting up Boone and the world. Then again, some of you have already seen that once, back when our church burned to the ground on King Street. To be clear, I don't want to see that at all. PLEASE DO NOT light fire bowls at church!

⁴ On screen please: God is light and in him there is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5).

⁵ Festival description from Karoline M. Lewis, *John (Fortress Preaching Commentaries)*, p. 116

We actually do often remember God's light leading us. The acolytes, whom we blessed earlier, bring the light of Christ into the sanctuary every Sunday. Thank you, and God bless you. We also light candles to remember loved ones on All Saints Day. Candlelight vigils are an ancient spiritual practice. One of the earliest known hymns in the Christian church is called "Hail Gladdening Light." Early Christians used to sing it while processing out of Christ's empty tomb with a perpetually lit candle to remind themselves that Jesus is the light of the world, and death isn't the final word. That's why we light candles at our Easter sunrise service. Because darkness doesn't last forever.

The Vacation Bible School children [image] had their own version of that ritual this week. Don't worry, not with candles but with glowsticks. They waved that light as they sang about Jesus being our lighthouse, our way in the darkness.

One of my favorite worship moments of the year is our Christmas Eve candlelight service. What's so powerful about that candle lighting is that it all starts with just one light – the Christ candle – because Jesus said I AM the light of the world. So we start with his light. But then we pass that light on from one person to the next. Because in Matthew's gospel Jesus says something different. He says, "**You are the light of the world**" (Matt 5:14).

We embody that truth on Christmas Eve as we each share the light of Christ with one another. The sanctuary begins to light up, brighter and brighter, until we're all aglow with the light of Christ. His light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it.

Then we're called to take that light into the world, into every single circumstance we encounter. You are the light of the world. At work, at home, at the grocery store, and even on social media (especially there!). We are the light of the world. We are the beacon of God's light and salvation. We are the light of compassion and mercy in the face of callousness and indifference. We are the light of God's unrelenting and grace-filled love for the world. We're called to shine. Doesn't that remind you of a song? This little light of mine...

Friends, you've got to let it shine! Let your light shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to God in heaven (Matt 5:16). Please let your light shine! Don't let your contribution to the world be passing along more darkness. There's already more than enough of that. It's too easy to get weighed down and frustrated and overwhelmed by the darkness. It's too easy to think it doesn't make a difference to be light in the world. But it doesn't take but one flicker of light to send the darkness running. And your flicker might just be the thing someone else needs today.

You don't have to raise your hand, but I wonder if there's anybody out there who feels like they just need one person to say "It's gonna be ok." Would you say that with me? *It's gonna be ok.* It's gonna be ok because the LORD – I AM WHO I AM – is our light and salvation (Ps 27:1). It's gonna be ok because Jesus is the light of the world. Even if you can't believe that for yourself right now, believe that someone else believes it, and let their candle light yours.

When my niece freaked out last week at the family slumber party when we turned off the lights, what got her through was hearing my daughter say, "It's gonna be ok. Just wait a second and you'll be able to see." Friends, if you can just hold on long enough, there's always light coming. God is light. So let every bit of light you see remind you that it's gonna be ok.

Every time you see a candle flicker, or light dance on top of water, or sunbeams spill over the mountaintops, remember the light of the world is with you, and following that light leads to life. The darkness won't last forever. Until Christ returns, let there be light. Let us be light. Amen.

[Benediction: Eph 5:8]