

## March 19 The Light of the World

John 7:14-18 & 8:12

The Bible is a story of moving from darkness to light. In the beginning, we read how God says, "Let there be light" as creation is spoken into existence. The concluding biblical image which is found In The Book of Revelation talks about a new heaven and earth. There it says that there will no longer be a need for light because God is with us. Throughout, light is a dominant symbol. Light symbolizes the presence and actions of God. Light also symbolizes the faithful actions of believers where we are called to let our light shine.

With this in mind we begin to see the importance in Jesus' words when he calls himself the "Light of the World." He is tapping into many rich symbols of our faith and is making an explicit connection between himself and God. Equally important to its meaning is when he made this pronouncement. We learn from John 7 that Jesus was attending the Feast of Tabernacles, also known as the Feast of Booths. It was celebrated in the fall to commemorate the Israelites' journey through the wilderness after leaving Egypt. Each year, the people were to build booths, or as they are called in Hebrew, sukkots, a temporary shelter like their ancestors used in the dessert. Most likely Jesus said these words on a special night during the feast called the Grand Illumination. Giant torches lining the courtyard of the temple burned so brightly that all of Jerusalem was illuminated. The celebration was commanded to happen by Moses because it would be easy to believe that, once settled in the Promised Land, they had arrived. In one sense this was true, but Moses wanted to remind them that they were always going to be on a journey of faithfulness. Moses wanted them to understand that "Arrival is a Myth."

At times, we need to be reminded this as well. We forget that our God is the God of the journey. We never fully arrive in this life because our ultimate destination is to be with God. Now upon first hearing this, it might sound depressing. There is a part of us that wants finality. We want to get someplace, achieve some goal and be done. But the more we think about it, the more we can understand what a positive even hopeful message this is. We need to celebrate that we worship a God of the journey.

When we believe that life is a pilgrimage it means everything in this world is just temporary. This belief is liberating. Think about it. When you find yourself in an

unwanted place, you can know that place is not a destination. It is just a stopping point. Think about how thankful you are that some places in your life were just stopping points! Now I understand the other part of this. There are those special moments when life and faith are so good and precious that we would like to stay there. Staying put, even in a precious moment, means that there is no growth and nothing else can be new.

All of us remember that special time when we held a new born baby, whether it is our own, a grandchild or a friend's. There is something very awe inspiring at that moment. We celebrate God's goodness and all of life. Yet, as wonderful as it is, we don't want life to stop. We want that child to grow, even though we know there will be moments of pain and sorrow to come, as well as joy. We look forward to their journey. So good or bad, joy or pain we are on a journey and, ultimately, that is a powerful and life-giving idea.

We need to give thanks to God who keeps stopping places from becoming staying places. Some people emotionally do quit journeying and stop. They never get over some great loss. It defines the rest of their days. They refuse to hear messages of new life and new beginnings. It is sad to watch. Our God is a God of light, reminding us to step forward in faith.

When Jesus says, "I am the Light of the World" Jesus was saying, "For those who understand life is a journey, for those who seek light and direction through all of life's stopping places, I will be your pillar of light." What does that truth look like in our everyday living? What does it mean to trust Christ as a source of light in our world? The author of our study book calls it a "Flashlight Faith." We have all experienced walking in the dark being guided by a flashlight. The point of a flashlight is not to show you the destination but the next few steps. When you trust Christ as a source of light, he gives direction one step at a time. This can be frustrating, at times, especially if you feel you need to know where your steps will take you. With some forks in the road you want to see farther down the path than you are permitted. You want to know what happens if you choose option A instead of option B. Yet often all we are told is to move forward in faith. You choose the option that seems to be the one God shows you to take. Once you take that step you pray that the next step will be revealed. You don't second guess it, you don't go back but, in faith, move forward.

How do you make those choices? The author has a good exercise. When you are facing a difficult decision for which you seek God's guidance, try this. Every morning get up twenty or thirty minutes earlier than normal. Go to a quiet place where you can be alone. Light a candle. Quiet yourself before God for a few minutes and then thank God for being present with you as symbolized by that light. Then give thanks for the blessings in your life. This practice builds confidence that no matter what the challenge you face, there are still blessings to celebrate. Now make your request known. State your challenge and what you need. After that ask, "Dear Lord, how can I honor you in this situation?" Pause. Be still. See what comes to you. Don't process the thoughts. Don't contend with how you will carry out any idea that comes or what that idea might require. Just let the thoughts come. Write them down. Keep a pad and pencil nearby. Do this over several days and see what repeating themes or actions emerge. Once you sense some direction, ask God to show you the next step. Don't make seeing the end of the path the goal, just knowing the next step. It is hard to live life a step at a time, yet if you can focus on Christ's direction you don't have to worry so much about where you will end up.

The unspoken truth that is behind the words, "I am the Light of the World" is that darkness is a reality for all of us. We all have those times where we are in the dark and without a light, the way forward is challenging at best. Sometimes, we need to confess our darkness is a result of our own actions. We make poor choices, we rush ahead without thinking, we say something in anger, or we hold on to a grudge. These actions and many more can leave us in darkness, upset with where we are, and wondering how to get out of the mess we are in. Ultimately there is some guilt as well when we face the fact that we are where we are because of our actions. When we come to such acknowledgements, as painful as they are, we can know that being able to admit our fault is a result of Christ working within us. We have not been abandoned. We are not beyond grace. Part of the work of Christ's light is to reveal truth, not to condemn us. We can then focus on the first step into a new life. We want to know how it will all be resolved but that is not what we are promised. We may have to forgive not knowing if it will be accepted. We may have to say I'm sorry not knowing if they will hear. We may have to make restitution without promises of restored relationships. But Christ, the Light of the World, will guide us if we follow his light.

Sometimes the darkness we experience is not of our own making. Sometimes our paths are just cloudy. We can't see the destination. We don't know how the road will end. Hearing news like cancer, or other life altering health conditions does that. Being the victim of other's poor choices can plunge us into darkness. And, there is that ultimate upsetting of our equilibrium and it is called age. Every so often we have to admit we can't do something we always have done for a variety of reasons and what the new normal is has yet to be determined. All of these are times of darkness and we need Jesus, the Light of the World. Again, we want to see the destination. That, we are rarely privileged to see. All we can do is trust Christ one step at a time.

Sometimes the journey of life is a difficult one. It takes us through a wilderness of sorts. Yet, as long as we stay on the journey, we refuse to let stopping places become staying places, and we can experience darkness being turned to light.

In closing let me share one story. Their new born baby had an undisclosed birth defect and died just a few weeks after birth. The parents were devastated. She didn't want to hear anything about how this was part of God's plan or that time heals. She was in darkness. What I told her is that God is with her in that pain. God knows what it is like to lose a son. God will be faithfully beside her, and for her to trust in that strength each day. I said, "Don't worry about tomorrow or next week. Just focus on what you need to do to get through today. You need to take care of yourself, your husband and your other son." Many years later I was visiting with them. After a time of healing they had another child, also a boy. Her career has expanded beyond anything she could have imagined back then. Life is good. She said to me, "The best advice I got during that difficult time was yours to ask God to get me through today. Focusing on that day, I found the energy and resources to get through it. Whenever I looked farther ahead I was overwhelmed. But God knew the future. God was faithfully moving me in the right direction."

This is what we are all promised. God in Christ will be with us. When we experience darkness we are reminded that this is not our destination it is just a stopping place not a staying place. There is a future beyond this moment. God will help us move forward but we have to trust and believe. Christ is "The Light of the World." You will be given a key ring with a sandal on it today to remind you, when life is challenging to look for and trust the light.