

‘The Light of the World’
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Text: John 8:12-20
Title: ‘The Light of the World’
Series: Who is Jesus?

During the process of discerning if the Lord was calling us to First Baptist Church, I took some time on two different evenings to walk around the church buildings. The first evening I experienced an overwhelming sense of overwhelming darkness. There were no lights on in the sanctuary and clouds dimmed the light of the surrounding buildings. As I returned to the car, I heard a whisper in my soul: ‘Remember where the light comes from’.

After the second evening I left without any such word; I left deeply disturbed. A few days later, during a time of worship at Regent College, we sang ‘Light of the world You stepped down into darkness, opened my eyes, let me see’.

And he did, all I knew. We were supposed to join Him, and you in the heart of the city.

“We are a community following Jesus with a heart for the city’ we say at First Baptist. Ok, Who is He? Who is Jesus? Who is this person in our midst?

‘Light’, he says. “I am the light of the world; follow Me and you will not walk in darkness but have the light of life’

Jesus could have and can make that claim to anyone, anywhere at any time. But He chose to make it in a particular context. When we know more about that context, Jesus’ claim, clear enough anywhere, anytime becomes all the more amazing!

The apostle John is careful to tell us that Jesus made the claim during Jewish Feast of Tabernacles. John 7 vs 2 “Now the Feast of Booths, the Feast of Tabernacles was at home’. There are three major feasts which people living within 15 miles of Jerusalem were obligated to attend: Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles.

Tabernacles is by far the most popular of the three, for it is the most joyful.

The Feast was, and still is, held in the Fall early in mid-October. It is celebrated for eight days. During those eight days, the worshippers live in little huts, or booths, or tents, which in Hebrew are called ‘sukkoth’. This Feast also goes by the name Sukkoth.

We have two Jewish families in our neighbourhood; one of the fathers a professor, the other a surgeon. In the past weeks both built tents in their backyards, where the families, as much as possible, at their meals.

Worshippers live in the tents to recall the days their ancestors lived in tents as they made their way across the Sinai Desert to the Promised Land.

And they live in tents during the Feast as a way to recall that during those days the Living God Himself – Yahweh – graciously chose to live among the people in a tent called the Tabernacle – hence the name – Feast of Tabernacles.

This most popular Feast is rich in nature and symbolism. The Feast is constituted around a water ceremony, a light ceremony, and a fundamental theological affirmation celebrated in the Festive Liturgy.

Briefly, the water ceremony helped recall how God miraculously provided water in the desert. And the water ceremony re-affirmed the great promises, that one day God would pour out living water, His own Spirit, upon dry and thirsty human souls. It was in the context of the water ceremony ‘on the great day of the Feast’ as John says that Jesus stood up and cried out – John 7: 37. ‘If anyone is thirsty’ and who is not? ‘come to Me and drink and out of the inmost being will flow rivers of living water’.

The fundamental theological affirmation celebrated in the Festival liturgy focuses on God’s promise to come and dwell among His people forever. In the liturgy we hear again and again God speaking the words ‘I Am’ or ‘I Am He’. I will help us hear what Jesus says in that context on November 8.

Of importance to us today is the Light ceremony. The ritual of the Feast is called “The Illumination of the Temple’. It took place in the part of the Jerusalem Temple called ‘The Court of the Women’, so named because that was as far in as women were allowed to go at that time. This court was a very busy, very noisy place because it was also where the Temple Treasury was located.

On the first night of the Feast, four huge candelabra were set up in the center of the court. Each candelabra has four golden bowls on top. They could only be reached by very tall ladders.

Floating in the bowls were wicks made from the undergarments of the priests. When the sun set and to the sound of joyful singing, the four candelabra were lit. And according to the Jewish Mishnah (Sukkoth 5: 2-4,) all of Jerusalem was aglow in the light!

This ceremony recalled God’s gracious guidance of the ancestors in the desert.

It would be then and still is very easy to get lost in the Sinai Desert. Even today, with all the advances in transportation and communication, people lose their way. The ancestors had no maps. There were no freeway signs.

So God guided them in concrete ways. God set before them a pillar of cloud during the day, and a pillar of fire during the night. Whenever the pillars moved the people would pack up their belongings and follow. If they did not follow they would be left to walk in the darkness alone.

God's gracious guidance was remembered during the Feast of Tabernacles by reading a number of Biblical texts. One text, sung during 'The Illuminate of the Temple' was Psalm 78 verse 13-14: 'We will tell the generations to come to praise Yahweh that they should put their confidence in God and not forget the works of God. He divided the sea, and caused them to pass through the He led them with the cloud by day, and all the night with a light of fire'.

Now, God's gracious guidance points to a basic dimension of God's nature and character. God can guide because God is light. This fact is affirmed throughout the Old Testament. And many of the texts were also read and sung, during the Illumination of the Temple.

Texts like –

Psalm 27: 1 – “Yahweh is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?”

Psalm 43:3 – “O send out Your light and Your truth: let them lead me.”

Isaiah 2:5 – ‘Come, house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of Yahweh.’

Isaiah 60:1 – “Arise, shine, for Your light has come, and the glory of Yahweh has risen you too.”

Isaiah 60:19 – “No longer will you have the sun for light by day, nor for brightness will the moon give you light; but you will have the Lord – Yahweh – for an everlasting light’.

For seven nights the people celebrated God as light. On the eighth night the candles were extinguished. The people looking forward to next year when light would, once again, illuminate the Jerusalem night.

On the eighth night Jesus was walking through the Treasury in the Court of the Woman. John 8:30 “ These words He spoke in the Treasury as He taught in the temple’. And in that place, which the night before had been ablaze but was now dark once more, Jesus proclaims ‘I Am the light. I. I am the light of the world. Whoever follow Me will not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life.’”

His claim is brilliant in every sense of the word. Jesus waits until the candle light goes out. He waits until dark.

It is as though Jesus has said – ‘You have seen the lights of the candelabra piercing the darkness for seven nights, illuminating all of Jerusalem. I am the light that pierces the darkness every night, illuminating the whole world. If you follow Me there will be light not only for seven joyous nights, but for every night and everyday the light of the four

candelabra is a glorious light, I know, but in the end it flickers and dies. I am the light that never goes out”. That is how Welen Barding paraphrases Jesus. “I am the light that never goes out.”

It is an enormously staggering claim! Given the necessity of light for human existence; given the centrality and pervasiveness of light in the religions of the first century – both Jewish and Gentile – Jesus is claiming for Himself cosmic significance. (L Newbigin, *The Light Has Come*, 102)

Indeed His claim is literally ‘I am the Light of the cosmos. Follow Me and you will never walk in darkness.

‘Walk in darkness’. The phrase makes me shudder. It suggests aloneness. It suggests aimlessness, confusion, fear, even paralysis. It suggests the picture of people grasping for directions, tripping over obstacles they cannot see.

Follow me and you will not walk in darkness. Why? ‘You will have the light of life’. You will have the light that reveals the obstacles in the way of life. You will have the light that illuminates the path of life. You will have the light that is life’!

‘Whoever follow Me’. Literally, whoever keeps on following me. The people at the Feast of tabernacles would have gotten the point. Just as the ancestors had to keep their eyes on the pillars of cloud and fire, so we have to keep our eyes on Jesus. Just as the ancestors had to pick up and move when the pillars moved, and stop when the pillars stopped, so we need to be ready to move when He moves and stop when he stops.

‘Follow Me’. Stay close to Me. Stay right on my heels. “I am the light of the cosmos.’ Walk with me and you will never walk in darkness”.

Consider some – just some – of the life-changing implications of Jesus’ cosmic claim.

First, if we stay close to Jesus the light we will never walk in darkness about God. We will not be in the dark about who God is and what god is like. Jesus the light leads us out of the vagueness of ‘God-talk’ to know God as God really is. Not all at once of course. In the nature of things that is not possible. It is too much to handle all at once. But step-by-step, day-by-day, year-by-year he reveals the Living God to us.

John tells us that Jesus’ Tabernacle claim generates a heated debate. In it Jesus says, John 8; 19, ‘If you knew Me you would know my Father also.’ To know me is to know the Father! As He would later say ‘Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father’. (John 14:9)

Jesus the light of the cosmos turns out to be the perfect revelation of the true God. He is God-Who-is-light shining into the world in person! The apostle Paul tells the people of Lodecea – Jesus is ‘the visible expression of the invisible God’. Paul tells the people of Corinth – ‘God who said, ‘light shall shine out of darkness’ has shown in our hearts to

give us the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ' 2 Cor. 4:6) Jesus is God with a face. We know the mystery that is Divinity in the face of Jesus. What is God like? Look at Jesus; God is just like Jesus!

You see, if we begin with the generic word 'God', we do not begin with God but with our own ideas about God which are not God (E. Stanley Jones). All human ideas about God are less than adequate, some positively mis-leading. Begin with Jesus and we begin with God's idea about God; we begin with God's idea about God's own personal self – revelation. 'God' is just like Jesus. The Father is just like Jesus; just as compassionate sent as Jesus, just as available as Jesus and approachable as Jesus, just as merciful as Jesus and Kind as Jesus, just as uncontrollable as Jesus. Stay close to the light of the world and we do not walk in darkness about God!

A second implication. If we stay close to Jesus the light we never walk in darkness about humanity. We need not be in the dark about what it means to be human. Jesus is not only the perfect revelation of Who God is. He turns out to also be the perfect revelation of who we are, of who we were created to be. Jesus is the one untarnished, untwisted, authentically whole human being.

And what stands out about Him? As we watch Him live the truly human humane life. What stands out about Him? He lives by faith. He trusts His Father. He loves His Father, delights in His Father, obeys His Father. So much as He can say, 'My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me' (John 4:34).

And Jesus loves others. He loves others with His whole being. He finds fullness as a human is giving His life away in servant love. (Philippians 2:5-11).

Jesus is what we were created and are being redeemed to be. Persons who believe and love. Jesus is what it means to be humans. Believing and loving.

Which is why we both run to Him and from Him. We run to Him because we see in Him what our hearts long to be. When we find Him we feel we have come home. And we have!

We run from Him because in His light we see – painfully at times – how far short we have fallen from who we were meant to be. We do not believe as we ought . we do not love as we ought. We feel ashamed. That is not His intent. It is just that the light of His presence exposes the shadows and corners where we hide. Since nothing can be in hiding in His presence we flee from Him even as we want to run to Him.

Yet we do not flee for long. For one thing, He is inescapable. But for another, we crave what we see in Him.

So, just as we do not begin the search to know God with 'God', so we do not begin the search to know humanity with 'humanity'. We do not begin with ourselves. We begin with Jesus, the one true human. We begin with Him who is all we were created to be.

In 1928, a gathering of the International Missionary Conference was held in Jerusalem, on the Mount of Olives. It lasted fifteen days. Those in attendance included Archbishop William Temple and missionaries like Robert Spear and John R. Mott. I wish I could have been there. At the end of the conference they issued a profound simple statement. 'Our message', they said 'is in Jesus Christ. He is the revelation of what God is and of what we, through Him, may become.' In Jesus we see who God is and who we are being released to be.

So E. Stanley Jones could say 'There is nothing higher for man or God than to be Christ-like'. There is no greater compliment than 'You are just like Jesus' – for a human being or for God! 'You are just like Jesus'.

Stay close to Jesus the light and we never walk in darkness about Divinity or humanity.

Which leads us to a third implication. If we stay close to Him we never walk in darkness about the nature of the human predicament. We need not be in the dark about what keeps us from being like Jesus, from being fully human. The light of the cosmos reveals the real truth about our predicament.

One of the most effective Secretary Generals of the United Nations was U Thant of Burma- Myamar speaking before an audience of some 2,000 world leaders who had met to discuss the condition for world peace. U Thant expressed his bewilderment. 'What element is lacking,' he asked, 'so that with all our skill and all our knowledge we still feel ourselves in the dark valley of discord and enmity.' What is it that inhibits us from going forward together to enjoy the fruits of human endeavor and to reap the harvest of human experience? Why is it, that for all our profound ideals, our hopes, and our skills, peace on earth is still a distant objective seen only dimly through the storm and turmoil of our present difficulties. (quote in Ray Stedman's Spiritual Warfare 20-21)

What is wrong with the world? In the presence of Jesus the Light we realize that our problem is not greed, though greed is a symptom of the problem. In the presence of Jesus the Light, we realize that our problem is not racism, though racism too is a symptom of the problem. In the presence of Jesus the Light we realize our problem is not sexism, though sexism is a symptom. Our problem is not nationalism or militarism. Though both are symptoms. Our problem is not disease, though it, too, is a symptom. Our problem is not addiction or abuse though they, too, are symptoms.

In the Presence of Jesus the Light we see that our problem is much deeper, much more sinister.

Jesus speaks of our predicament in a way no one else ever has. Jesus shows us that we are caught in a complex web from which we cannot free ourselves. 'Something' has gotten a hold on us, and we cannot break its grip. That 'something' is a combination of the forces of sin, evil and death. The problem according to the Light of the world is that we come in bondage to sin, held hostage by the power of evil, we live in the grips of death.

What makes it so bad is that the bondage blinds us so that we do not see the true nature of our condition.

Because He loves us, He exposes the terrible truth. It was during the Feast of Tabernacles that He said, 'You still know the truth, and the truth shall make you free' (John 8:32) He tells us that none of us can do anything about the real problem. We are powerless against sin, evil and death. We stand in need of a Redeemer. We stand in need of someone stronger than sin, evil and death. We stand in need of Him.

Stay close to Jesus and we no longer walk in the darkness about what ails us. Nor in the dark about what finally cures us. I can hardly wait until Christmas when we again hear the angel tell Joseph to call Mary's child Jesus. He, Himself, will save His people from their sins (Mathew 1:21). And when we again hear the angel tell the shepherd, "For unto you is born this day a Savior who is Christ the Lord (Luke 2:14)

Which brings us to a forth implication of Jesus' great claim. Stay close to the light of the world and we do not walk in darkness about the will of God. He leads us out of the darkness, into the light of God's good purposes. He opens up God's great plans for us and opens up the way to walk into those plans.

Again, not all at once. As God led the Israelites across the desert one step at a time, one day at a time, one week at a time, one year at a time. So Jesus the Light leads us one step at a time, one day at a time. He does not lay out for us a master blue-print for our lives. He does tell us where it all ends – being conformed to His image in a transformed creation. He does not lay out a detailed image of how He will take us there.

When I was ordained to the preaching ministry I never imagined going to Manila. I never imagined coming to Canada. When I accepted the appointment at Regent College ten years ago I figured I would be there well into the retirement years. Little did I know that at 61 –years-old I would be one of the pastors of an historic church in the core of world-class city. He does not give us the master plan for our lives. He gives us Himself. As Bread, as Water, as Light. And step by step unfolds the Father's will for us.

This is how it was for Jesus in His earthly life. Leslie Newbigin, who lived most of his life in India writes: (Quote from Page 200 – The Light Has Come)

This gives me much comfort as I enter in ministry in the city with you. I have many dreams as you know about what First Baptist is to be and do at this time in history. And so do you. But the only dreams that finally matter are his.

Clearly, following Him into His dream will mean change. How could it be otherwise? But all change, however good is experienced as loss. And the temptation is to run to the past. Like the Israelite in the desert. The uncertainty inherent in the journey to the Promised Land was too much to bear. They wanted Moses to take them back to the 'good old day' in Egypt. But God in His mercy would not let them go back. He had

better plans for them. And called them to follow Him into His yet-to-be –unfolded goodness.

Jesus the Light knows where He is taking His church. He knows where He is going and He will not leave us to walk in the darkness about His will.

Which brings us to our fifth implication of Jesus' cosmic claim. If we stay close to Him, if we dare to take the risks and follow Him into deeper intimacy with Him, we will experience more and more inner cleansing, inner healing. For as Light He moves into the secret places of our lives – into the 'shacks' of our hearts – into our thought life – into our emotional fantasies – to expose any and all darkness, and burn it away. Like radiation therapy, the intensity of the Light kills the cancer cells of the deepest darkest.

And we begin to experience more and more of what we might call 'inner radiance'.

Jesus is the sun shine on plants causing them to grow and bear fruit, so the Son of God shines in us causing us to mature and bear the fruit of His perfect humanity. Our bodies may decay but not our souls. There will be an 'inner radiance'.

It all depends on where we fix our attention on the darkness around us and in us, or on the Light of the world around us and in us.

Joyful, Joyful, we adore thee
God of glory, Lord of Love
Hearts unfold like flowers before the,
Opening to the sun above.
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness,
Drive the dark of doubt away.
Giver of immortal gladness
Fill us with the light of day.

So, who is He? Jesus whom we are seeking to follow in the city? "Light", He says. "I am the light of this whole world. Whoever follows Me shall not walk in darkness but will have the Light of life."