

2.12.23 I Am the Light of the World John 1:1-14; 8:12-20; 9:1-7

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Light of the World, illuminate us all, Amen.

Our family has a cottage in southern Maine where I spent my summers growing up. It's less than 100 miles north of Boston, so it's not in the wilderness. We always had electricity and indoor plumbing. The summer I turned five years old, my parents took us to visit friends who had a place on Monhegan Island off the coast of Maine.

Things were a lot more rustic on the island and when night came it was so much darker than what I experienced living next to Boston. There was no electricity in the house, only two gas lights. My sisters and I were going to sleep upstairs, and the darkness was the deepest I'd ever experienced. I knew everything was okay and my parents were in the house, but I couldn't get over how dark it was – no night light, no streetlight edging around window shades – just unbelievable darkness. I lay in bed with my eyes wide open and it was darker than it was when I was in bed at home with my eyes shut. This amazed me. My mother must have been a little worried about how we'd handle it because after a few minutes I could hear footsteps on the stairs which were at the far end from where I was lying in bed and then I could see light moving into the space and when the kerosene lamp my mother was carrying came into view it illuminated the entire attic so I could see everything, and I felt more at ease with my surroundings. Obviously I've never forgotten that experience of darkness and light because it struck me so profoundly at a young age.

Living on Monhegan Island or Cape Cod one is blessed to be able to see the sun rise and set over the water if you choose. Seeing the beauty of a sunrise or sunset, recognizing the warmth and light the sun provides as well as its reliability and importance for plants and crops to grow, it isn't a surprise that in many ancient cultures the sun was worshiped as a god. Jews and Christians don't worship the sun but the God who made the sun and everything else. Connections between light and God's power, presence, and glory are found throughout the Bible, starting in the beginning. The Bible opens saying that *"the earth was a formless void **and darkness** covered the face of the deep."* **Genesis 1:3**, *"Then God said, **Let there be light**"; and there was*

light.” The first act of creation is God speaking light into being and the **light was good** and **“God separated the light from the darkness”** (Genesis 1:4).

Later **Psalm 27:1** affirms, **“The Lord is my light and my salvation.”** **Psalm 36:9** declares, **“With you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.”** In **Luke 2:32** the prophet Simeon, guided by the Spirit, took the baby Jesus in his arms, and praised God, saying Jesus would be, **“a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”** Simeon was saying Jesus would be the light to show people the way to God. Light provides warmth, illumination, clarity, and enables growth.

Symbolically, light represents goodness, while night and the cover of darkness provide an opportunity for all kinds of evil. **John invites us to come to the light.**

Images of light permeate John’s Gospel from the first verses. John begins his Gospel by telling us that **in Jesus there is life which is the light of all people (1:4) and Jesus is the true light which enlightens everyone (1:9).** The emphasis on all people and everyone is signaling from the start of the Fourth Gospel that Jesus came not just as light for the Jewish people, but for the world. That **light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not and will not ever overcome it (1:5).** One way of reading that verse is the darkness will never “snuff it out.” It makes me smile to think of Jesus like one of those candles on a birthday cake that you can’t blow it because it just keeps re-lighting. In **John 3:19-21** we’re told that the movement of faith is toward the light, toward God. Then in chapters 8 and 9, Jesus declares he is **“the light of the world”** and demonstrates the truth of his statement by giving light to the eyes of a man born blind. We’ve heard from John 1:1-14 and John 8:12-20, listen now to **John 9:1-7:**

“As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, *“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”* Jesus answered, *“Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. **We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.**”* When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, saying to him, *“Go, wash in the pool of Siloam”* (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.”

In John's Gospel, Jesus' first statement about being the Light of the world is made in the temple in Jerusalem during the festival or Feast of Booths (also known as Tabernacles, John 7:2). This was a weeklong celebration commemorating the forty years Israel wandered in the desert during the time of Moses. Former Prime Minister of Israel Golda Meir (1898-1978) once lamented that Moses led the people for forty years through the wilderness to the only place in the Middle East with no oil! The Hebrew word for "booths" is Succoth. After the Israelites left the land of Egypt, they camped at a place that bore this name. It was there God began to accompany them by day in a pillar of cloud and by night in a pillar of fire **"to give them light"** (Exodus 12:37; 13:20-22).¹

Each evening in the temple during the Feast of Booths, worshipers crowded into the women's court where four enormous lamp stands or candelabras, each with four large bowls of oil were lit with wicks made from the discarded robes and undergarments of the priests; that's what you call recycling. Throughout the night, young men from priestly families climbed up ladders to refill the lamps so the light shone unceasingly. The light reflected off the temple's white stone walls and the bronze gate at the end of the courtyard, where the Levites played their harps, lyres, cymbals, and trumpets as men, noted for their piety and good works, sang and danced to the Songs of Ascents, Psalms 120-134, with as many as eight flaming torches in their hands. These Psalms help to capture the moods of the festival: *"Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord hear my voice...my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning"* (Psalm 130:1, 6). *"The Lord swore to David a sure oath...I have prepared **a lamp for my anointed one**"* (Psalm 132:11, 17). *"Come bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord, who stand **by night** in the house of the Lord! Lift up your hands to the holy place, and bless the Lord"* (Psalm 134:1-2).

The radiance emanating from the temple illuminated courtyards throughout the city of Jerusalem until the first shafts of daylight appeared over the Mount of Olives. It's in this setting that John presents Jesus saying, **"I am the light of the world, whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."** The oil burned

¹ If you're interested in learning more, see the following: Exodus 14:19-20, Psalms 78:14 & 105:39. The pillar of fire is mentioned in the celebration of the Feast of Booths in Nehemiah 9:12, 19. See also Zechariah 14:7-16 about light and the Feast of Booths.

out, the light of the lamps would be extinguished, the festival ended each year, but Jesus is the light that will never go out, be quenched or be overwhelmed by darkness. To “walk in darkness” meant acting sinfully and following Jesus in the light of life meant living in accordance with the will of God. **Proverbs 4:18-19** says, *“But the path of the righteous is like **the light of dawn**, which shines brighter and brighter until full day. The way of the wicked is like **deep darkness**; they do not know what they stumble over.”* Doc Rivers, who coached the Boston Celtics basketball team from 2004-2013 and now coaches for Philadelphia, used to tell his players what his father told him, *“Nothing good happens after midnight.”* What he means is during the darkest part of the night a lot of bad things happen, violence, crime, and abuse - people like the cover of darkness more than the clear light of day when they’re doing wrong. **John 3:19** says, *“**the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.**”* God wants us to come to and love the Light who is Jesus.

In John 9, Jesus enlightens the eyes of a man blind from birth, demonstrating he truly is *“**the light of the world**”* (9:5). The disciples asked Jesus, *“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?”* It’s surprising what people will say to try and explain a disability, an infirmity, an illness, a disease, or a death. To paraphrase Jesus’ reply: *“His blindness has nothing to do with his sins or his parents’ sins. But that God’s power might be seen at work in him. **We must keep on doing the works of him who sent as me long as it is day. Night is coming when no one can work.**”* Who says your problem is an opportunity for God’s power, presence, and healing to be displayed? The Light of the world, that’s who.

The rest of the story in John 9 is about discipleship and what it means to “see the light” physically as well as spiritually. **After seeing the light or coming to the light, we’re called to walk in the light.** The man faithfully bears witness to what Jesus did for him regardless of the abuse he takes. In the same way, you’re to bear witness to what Jesus has done for you. In John 9, the opponents of Jesus are those can’t see who he is, they’re blind to the light, but the man is gradually able to see with greater clarity who Jesus is. He first refers to him as (9:11) *“The man called Jesus,”* then the more he thought about it, he calls him, *“a prophet”* (9:18), then in defending himself to the religious authorities he says, *“If this man were not from God, he could do nothing,”*

(9:33), and finally when Jesus finds him and speaks to him, the man declares, “*Lord, I believe*” (9:38). He needed Jesus to lead him from the darkness to the light. It’s this spiraling up in faith that the Fourth Gospel hopes will happen for you and me. That we move from seeing Jesus as a man, to a prophet, to a man from God, as Lord, and as the Light of the World.

There’s so much heartache and pain in our families, nation, and world. The destruction and loss of life in Turkey and Syria from the earthquake is so sad. We see victims of gun violence and domestic violence on a weekly basis in our nation. Grief seems to be everywhere. This past week BBC members Jim and Jill Still lost their son Colin who was only in his early 30’s. We want and need a little light in the darkness. I read a story by a woman looking back at an experience she had when she was younger. “When I was in college, I used to baby-sit for a six-year-old boy named Peter. His mother started hiring me after her husband died. I recall putting Peter to bed. The house was very old. Over the years various owners had added on to it section by section. The electrical system seemed to be an afterthought. There was only one way to switch on the light at the end of the upstairs hall where Peter’s bedroom was located: you had to turn at a right angle to the staircase and grope along the hall to his door until you felt the switch with your hand. Whenever we were downstairs watching television and it was time for bed, Peter would stare into the darkness at the top of the stairs and say to me, “*You go first.*” I would start up the stairs alone, and just as I was getting to the top step I would hear footsteps behind me. Then Peter’s hand was in mine, and I groped along the wall and found the switch.

What struck me about this is that Peter didn’t wait for me to turn on the light. It was enough simply to know I was there in the dark. “*You go first,*” he had said, and as long as I did go first, then he had the courage to follow after me. I remember Peter’s hand in mine to this day, not just because it charmed me, but because it touched something profound that I have observed is true in myself and others: The great hunger of the human heart to trust that there is some power, some strength, some hand waiting to take ours in the shadow of the unknown.”

She was a light that helped Peter face the darkness. Jesus is the light who helps us face the darkest and most difficult moments of our life. There are moments and

seasons for all of us when it seems like night will never end – times of stress, heartache, depression, disappointment, physical struggles, relational pain, financial hardship, regret, sin, and grief, yet in all of them, if we will allow him, Jesus promises, *“those who follow me will never walk in darkness.”* As we live as Jesus teaches, Christ promises to shed light on our way. Those of us who follow Jesus in the light of life, are called **to help other people when their way is dark**. We’re to let our light shine to help others face the darkness. Years ago, I led a memorial service for a 39-year-old man who died unexpectedly. He was the father of two teenage daughters,. One of the girls shared that she was supposed to be shopping with her dad, not at his funeral. I never forgot that. Where does a person turn in moments like that? When you’re walking through the darkest valley, God still sheds the light of life on you. God can also use you to be light for those who feel like they can’t see any light at the moment. **Og Mandino wrote, “I will love the light for it shows me the way. Yet I will endure the darkness for it shows me the stars.”** The moon has no light of its own; all it can do is reflect the light of the sun. In the same way, you and I can reflect the light and love of Jesus, God’s son, to others.

One final thing about light is that it can illuminate, or it can blind you if you aren’t careful. That’s the way it is with Jesus, the light of the world as well. Blaise Pascal (6/19/1623 – 8/19/1662) a French mathematician, physicist, philosopher, and writer observed, *“In faith there is enough light for those who want to believe and enough shadows to blind those who don’t.”*

Jesus invites us to come to the light, walk in the light, and to let our light shine. In the final chapter of the final book of the Bible, in John’s vision of heaven, **Revelation 22:5**, says, *“And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, they will reign forever and ever. Amen”*

Blessing The cross, we will take it. The bread, we will break it.

The pain, we will bear it. The joy, we will share it.

The Gospel, we will live it. The love, we will give it.

The light, we will cherish it. The darkness, God shall perish it. Amen

The Iona Community

Questions for Discussion or Reflection:

1. What feelings do you associate with darkness? Do you like it or dread it or are you somewhere in between?
2. Do you have any vivid memories of experiencing a truly dark place, for example, during a blackout, while camping or in a tunnel or a cave? Have you ever lived in a place without electricity? If so, what was it like at night?
3. What is appealing to you about Jesus' statement, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."
4. The Fourth Gospel conceives of sin more in terms of a person's response to Jesus rather than simply morality or behavior. How is this understanding displayed in John 9 and the story of the man born blind? Read John 9:1-38 and see what happens with him and how his understanding of Jesus grows clearer.
5. Has your ability to perceive who Jesus is grown over time as it did for the man born blind? How has your understanding of Jesus changed?
6. How is following Jesus in your daily life helpful, like following someone with a light through a dark place?
7. How can you share light with others who are in darkness (it may be the darkness of unbelief, or of a crisis or difficulty of some kind)? How can you "let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).