

The Light of the World

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[0 : 00] Living God, we believe that you enabled the Apostle John to remember this incident and accurately record the words of Jesus. Now we pray that you would help us understand what we've read, and more than understand, will you help us actually live in the reality to which these words point.

This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Over the past weekend, Sharon and I were in Manila, the Philippines.

And before exploring the text which Evelyn has just read for us, I'd like to take a few moments and just briefly share with you about our trip. Prior to accepting the call to come to First Baptist Church, I had been invited by the Union Church of Manila to come and preach for their 95th anniversary celebration.

Union Church was formed in 1914 to serve the then burgeoning foreign population. The church began as a union of Presbyterian, Methodists, and Disciple of Christ believers serving and living in Manila.

The church has borne a vibrant, contagious witness to Jesus through invasion and war, through martial law and revolution, through recessions, depressions, and countless natural disasters.

[1 : 27] By the time I became pastor in 1985, the congregation was made up of people from 21 different countries of the world. It's now 56 different countries of the world.

And from 26 different Christian denominations. Which meant that I was always in trouble with someone for not doing it right. Our years at Union Church were some of the richest and most challenging yet.

For example, we were caught up in the middle of the so-called people power revolution of 1986. When millions of Filipinos took to the street and non-violently overthrew a corrupt dictatorship.

Because of the way the Lord used me to guide the congregation through those tumultuous times, they asked if I would come and celebrate 95 years of following Jesus.

That was the theme of the celebration. 95 years of following Jesus in Manila, in the Philippines, in Asia. Now, as you likely know, two weeks ago, just two weeks ago, Manila was hit by a super typhoon, resulting in devastating flooding.

[2 : 43] Thirteen and a half inches of rain, 343 millimeters of rain, fell in six hours. That's one month of rain in six hours.

That's one third of our annual rainfall in six hours. Hundreds of thousands of people lost everything. Their homes and their possessions.

And hundreds of people lost their loved ones. We were able to hear about much of the relief effort, in particular spending some time with the staff of World Vision Philippines and World Vision South Asia.

What a challenge they face. And what a marvelous job they're doing. What sacrifices they're making. And what faith they are exercising.

Providentially, at the beginning of this year, the Lord led Union Church of Manila to start what they call the Feeding the Multitudes program. At the beginning of the year, they thought, well, let's have a gala, a dinner in a downtown ballroom for 900 people.

[3 : 51] Let's just throw out the stops and have this dinner. And as they were planning it, they came under conviction that they needed to do something else. So they started the Feeding the Multitude program, where they have now raised enough money to feed 6,000 families, to provide rice for the coming year and Bibles for each family.

And they've raised enough money to get training for six congregations that are emerging in that area, to raise up six sets of pastoral leadership. And I was really proud of that congregation.

A year after we moved to Manila, we adopted one of the many orphan children. And we were able to bring Marissa and her husband Anthony with us on the trip.

It was moving to watch her as she, 20 years later now, reenters the world in which she was born, about which she could remember nothing. She has much to process.

She and her husband should have landed at the airport by now. They were coming after us. She has much to process. She was very disturbed by the massive poverty in this city of 10 million people.

[5 : 02] And she, as I, was disturbed by the widening gap between the rich and the poor. She, however, now knows why we gave her the middle name Joy.

Because she embodies the spirit of the Filipino people. This joy they have, even in the face of calamity. And I was taken again by the capacity God has given the people of those islands to recreate their lives after tragedy.

And I thought, as there was there the last week, of the text where John says, the light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it.

Thank you for praying for us. We are really glad to be home with you. During the process of discerning whether or not the Lord was calling us to join First Baptist Church, I took some time on two different evenings to walk around these buildings.

The first evening, I experienced overwhelming sense of overwhelming darkness. There were no lights on in the building.

[6 : 16] And the clouds dimmed the lights from the surrounding buildings. And as I made my way back to the car, I heard a whisper in my soul. Remember, Daryl, where the light comes from.

The second evening, I left without any such word. And I felt deeply disturbed. A couple of days later, during one of the worship times at Regent College, we sang, Light of the world, you stepped down into darkness.

Opened my eyes and helped me see. And he did. And I knew in that moment that 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 of First Baptist. Light, he says, Make that claim to anyone, anywhere, anytime.

But he chose to make the claim in a particular context. And when we know more about that context, his claim, clear enough, anywhere, anytime, becomes all the more amazing.

[7 : 59] The Apostle John is careful to tell us that Jesus made this claim during the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles. John 7, verse 2. Now the Feast of Tabernacles was at hand.

All of John 7 and 8 takes place in the context of that religious holiday. There are three major feasts, you may know, that anyone living within 15 miles of Jerusalem was obligated to attend.

They are Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. Tabernacles was by far the most popular because it was the most joyful. The feast was and still is held in the month of October.

Usually early October to mid-October. It's celebrated for eight days. And during those eight days, the worshippers live in little huts or tents, which in Hebrew are called Succoth.

And thus, the other name for this feast, Succoth. We have two Jewish families living in our neighborhood. One father is a professor of economics.

[9 : 07] The other is a surgeon at Women's and Children's Hospital. And during the past weeks, those fathers have built tents in their backyards and have tried to have all their meals in the tents.

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

And the worshippers live in tents as a way to recall that during those days, the living God himself, Yahweh, chose to dwell among his people in a tent called the Tabernacle, hence the Feast of Tabernacles.

Now, this most joyous feast is made up of rich symbolism and rich ritual. The feast is constituted around a water ceremony, a light ceremony, and a fundamental theological affirmation celebrated in the festival liturgy.

Briefly, the water ceremony helped recall God's gracious provision of water in the desert so that people would not die. And the water ceremony reaffirmed the promises God made that one day he would pour out living water.

[10 : 27] He would pour out his Spirit upon thirsty and dry souls. It was in that context of the water ceremony, on the great day of the feast, as John says, that Jesus stood up and cried out in a loud voice, John 7, 37, If anyone is thirsty, and who is not, come to me and drink, and out of your innermost being will flow rivers of living water.

The fundamental theological affirmation celebrated in the festival liturgy focused on God's promise to one day come and literally live among his people forever.

And in the festival liturgy, we hear God speak of himself over and over again using the words, I am, or I am he. I will help us listen to Jesus' claims in that context on November 8th.

Of importance to us today is the light ceremony. This ritual of the feast was called the illumination of the temple. It took place in the part of the Jerusalem temple known as the court of the women because that was as far in as women could go at that time.

The court was a very busy, noisy place because this was also the place where the temple treasury was located. Now, on the first night of the feast, four huge candelabra were set up in this court.

[11 : 57] On the top of each of the candelabra were four huge bowls. In order to reach them, you had to have tall ladders. In these four bowls were these huge wicks made of the undergarments of the priests.

My kids always like to hear that part of the story. When the sun set, and to the sound of joyful singing, the four candelabra were lit, and according to the Jewish Mishnah, all of Jerusalem was ablaze with the light.

This ceremony took place every night except the eighth night, a fact which will become important in just a moment. The ceremony recalled God's gracious guidance for the ancestors in the desert.

It was and still is very possible to get lost in the Sinai Desert. Even with advances in transportation and communication, people still get lost. The ancestors had no maps.

There were no freeway signs. So God guided them in a very concrete way. God provided a pillar of cloud in the daytime and a pillar of fire at night.

[13 : 12] Whenever the pillars moved, the people were to pack up their goods and follow. If you didn't follow, you were left in the desert to walk in the darkness alone.

God's gracious guidance is celebrated throughout this feast by reading a number of texts. One such text, which was sung over and over, is Psalm 78.

We will tell the greatness of the Lord and the praises of Yahweh that they should put their confidence in God and not forget the works of God. He divided the sea, caused them to pass through.

He led them with the cloud by day and all night with a light of fire. Now, God's gracious provision of guidance pointed to a fundamental dimension of God's nature and character.

God could guide because God is light. This fact is affirmed throughout the Old Testament and many of these texts were also read and sung during the Feast of Tabernacles.

[14 : 15] Text like Psalm 27. 1. The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? Psalm 43. 3. Send out your light and guide me.

Isaiah 2. 5. Come, house of Jacob. Let us walk in the light of Yahweh. Isaiah 60, verse 1. Arise and shine, for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

And Isaiah 60, verse 19. No longer will you have the sun for day by night, nor for brightness will the moon be for your light, but you will have the Lord himself, Yahweh, as an everlasting light.

So all of these texts are read and sung during the Feast of Tabernacles. For seven nights, the people celebrated God as light.

And then on the eighth night, the candelabra were extinguished and the people then returned to wait another year to have light illumined the night of Jerusalem.

[15 : 16] On the eighth night, Jesus is walking in the treasury, in the temple. John 8, verse 20, verse 30. These words Jesus spoke in the treasury as he taught in the temple.

And in that place, which the night before had been ablaze, but was now returned to the darkness, Jesus proclaims, I am the light.

I, I, I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you will never walk in darkness, but have the light of life.

His claim is brilliant in every sense of the word. Jesus waits until the candlelight goes out. Jesus waits until dark to make his claim.

It is as though he said, You have seen the lights of the candelabra piercing the darkness for seven nights, illuminating Jerusalem. I am the light that pierces the darkness every night and every day, illuminating the world.

[16 : 25] If you follow me, you will have light, not only for seven joyous nights, but for every night and every day. The light of the four candelabra is a bright light, I know, but it only flickers and dies.

I am the light that never goes out. That's how William Barclay paraphrases Jesus' claim. I am the light that never goes out.

It's an enormously huge claim. Given the necessity of light for human existence, and given the centrality and pervasiveness of the image of light in the religions of the first century, Jesus is claiming for himself cosmic significance.

Indeed, he literally says, I am the light of the cosmos. I am the light of the cosmos. Follow me, and you will not walk in darkness.

Walk in darkness. That phrase causes me to shudder. It suggests aloneness, it suggests aimlessness, confusion, fear, even paralysis. It suggests a picture of people grappling for direction and tripping over obstacles and tripping over obstacles in their way.

[17 : 39] Follow me, and you will not walk in the darkness. Why? You will have the light of life. You will have the light that reveals the obstacles in the way to life.

You will have the light that reveals the path to life. You will have the light that is life. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, he says.

Literally, it is, whoever keeps on following me. And the people at the Feast of Tabernacles would have understood the point. Just as the ancestors had to keep their eyes on the pillar of cloud and fire, so we have to keep our eyes on Jesus.

And just as the ancestors would pick up and move whenever the light, the cloud would move or stop when the cloud would stop, so we need to be ready to pick up and move when Jesus moves and to stop when he stops.

Follow me. Stay close to me. Stay on my heels. I am the light of the cosmos. And if you stay close to me, you will never walk in darkness.

[18 : 50] Well, the implications of Jesus' claim are many. Consider with me just some of the implications of this cosmic statement.

First, if we stay close to Jesus the light, we will never be in the 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 so that we may know God as God really is. Not all at once, of course.

In the nature of things, that's not possible. It's too much to handle all at once. But step by step, day by day, year by year, Jesus reveals to us the living God.

John tells us that at the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus' claim generated quite a heated discussion. And in the claim, Jesus says, John 8, verse 19, if you knew me, you would know my Father.

[19 : 58] To know me is to know my Father. He would later say, if you have seen me, you've seen my Father. Jesus, the light of the cosmos, turns out to be the perfect revelation of the true God.

He is God who is light shining in the world in person in a way that we can grasp. The apostle Paul told the believers that Colossae, that Jesus is the visible expression of the invisible God.

Paul told the believers in Corinth, God who said, light shall shine out of darkness, has shone in our hearts to give us the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. Jesus is God with a face.

We know the mystery of divinity in the face of Jesus. What is God like? Look at Jesus. God is just like Jesus.

You see, if we begin the search to understand God with the word God, we do not begin with God, but with our ideas about God, which are not God.

[21 : 10] All human ideas about God are less than adequate. Some are positively misleading. But if we begin the search to know God with Jesus, we are beginning with God's idea about Jesus.

We begin with God's personal self-revelation. God is just like Jesus. The Father is just like Jesus. Just as compassionate as Jesus.

Just as available and accessible as Jesus. Just as merciful and kind as Jesus. And just as uncontrollable as Jesus. Stay close to Jesus, the light, and we do not walk in the darkness about God.

A second implication. If we stay close to Jesus, the light, we never walk in the darkness about humanity. humanity. We need not be in the dark about what it means to be human.

You see, Jesus is not only the perfect revelation of who God is, He's the perfect revelation of who we are or who we were meant to be. Jesus is the one untarnished, untwisted, totally, wholly, adequate human being.

[22 : 21] And what stands out about Jesus? When you watch this one true human live the truly human, human life, what stands out about Jesus? It is that He lives by faith.

He trusts His Father. He loves His Father. He delights in His Father. He obeys His Father. So much so that He can say, My food is to do the will of the one who sent me.

And Jesus loves others. He spends His life loving others with every fiber of His being. Jesus, the one true human, expresses true humanity by giving Himself away in servant love.

Jesus is what we were created and are being redeemed to be. Persons who believe and persons who love. Jesus is what it means to be human, believing and loving.

This, I think, explains why we both run to Jesus and run from Jesus. We run to Jesus because we see in Him everything we long to be.

[23 : 31] When we find Jesus, we feel that we are at home and we are. But we run from Jesus because in His light we are, painfully at times, in His light we discover how far short we fall from being the humans we were created to be.

In His light we discover how far we fall from believing and loving and we feel ashamed. That's not His purpose, by the way. He doesn't intend to shame us.

It's just that in His presence, in His light, all the shadows and corners start to get to be revealed. Since nothing can be hidden in His presence, we want to flee.

But we can't flee for long. For one thing, He's unavoidable. And for the other is that we crave what we see in Him. So just as we do not begin the search for God with the word God, so we do not begin the search for humanity with the word humanity.

We do not begin with ourselves. We do not begin with ourselves to understand ourselves. We begin with Jesus, the true human. He is what we were created to be.

[24 : 45] In 1928, a gathering of the International Missionary Conference met in Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives. They met for 15 days. Boy, I wish I could have been there.

Attendees included people like the Archbishop William Temple, missionaries like Robert Spear and John R. Mott. At the end of that 15-day conference, they came up with their Great Declaration.

And the Great Declaration after 15 days was one sentence. Our message, they said, is Jesus Christ. He is the revelation of who God is and of who we by His grace can become.

In Jesus, we see who God is and who we by His grace can become. That's why E. Stanley Jones then could say, there is nothing higher for man or God than to be Christ-like.

Christ-like. Say that again. There is nothing higher for man or God than to be Christ-like. The highest compliment you can ever pay is, you are just like Jesus.

[25 : 50] It's the highest compliment you can pay a person and it's the highest compliment you can pay God. You are just like Jesus. Stay close to the light and you never walk in darkness about divinity or humanity.

A third implication. If we stay close to the light, we never walk in darkness about the nature of the human predicament.

We need not be in the dark about what it is that keeps us from being like Jesus, that keeps us from being fully human. The light of the cosmos reveals the real truth of the human condition.

One of the most effective Secretary Generals of the United Nations in my judgment was U Nu of Burma. Speaking to an audience of some 2,000 world leaders who had met to talk about the conditions for world peace, U Nu expressed his bewilderment.

He said, What element is lacking so that with all our skill and all our knowledge we still find 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?

[27 : 06] Why is it, he said, why is it that for all our profound, professed ideals, our hopes and our skills, peace on earth is still a distant objective seen only dimly through the storm and turmoils of our present difficulties?

What is wrong with the world, he asked. In the presence of Jesus' delight, we realize that our problem is not greed, although greed is a symptom of the problem.

In the presence of Jesus' delight, we realize that our problem is not racism, though racism is a symptom of the problem. In the presence of Jesus' delight, we realize that sexism is not our problem, though it is a symptom of the problem. In the presence of Jesus' light, we realize that nationalism and militarism are not our problem, though they are a symptom of the problem. Our problem is not disease, although it is a symptom of the problem. Our problem is not addiction or abuse, though they are symptoms of the problem. In the presence of Jesus, we realize that our problem is much deeper and much more sinister. You see, Jesus describes the human condition in a way that no one ever had. Jesus shows us that we are caught in a complex web from which we cannot free ourselves. Something's got a hold of us, and we cannot free ourselves from this grip. That something is a combination of the forces of sin and evil and death. Jesus speaks to each of these at different points throughout the Feast of Tabernacles. The problem, according to the light of the cosmos, is that we are held in bondage to sin, we are held hostage by the power of evil, and we live in the grip of death. And what makes it so bad is that this bondage blinds us so that we do not know our true condition. Because He loves us, He exposes the terrible truth. It's during the Feast of Tabernacles that Jesus says His famous words, you shall know the truth, and the truth will make you free. He tells us the truth.

He tells us that none of us can do anything about our real problem. That we are powerless with the real problem. That we stand in need of a Redeemer. That we stand in need of someone who is stronger than sin and evil and death. That we stand in need of Him. Stay close to Jesus, and you're never in the dark about what ails us. Nor in the dark about what heals us. I can hardly wait till Christmas, my favorite time of the year, when we hear the angels say to Joseph again, he's told that he's supposed to call Mary's child Jesus. For as the angel says, he himself will save his people from their sins. And we hear the angel say to the shepherds again, I have good news for you, for unto you has been born a Savior. Which brings us to a fourth implication of Jesus' great claim. Stay close to the light of the world, and we do not walk in the darkness about the will of God.

He leads us out of the darkness into the light of God's purposes. He opens up God's great plan for us, and then leads us on the path that takes us into that great plan.

[30 : 38] 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 before us this grand blueprint for our lives. I wish he did, but he doesn't. He does tell us where it's all going to end, conformed to his image in a transformed creation.

But he does not lay out a detailed map of how he's going to take us there. When I was ordained to the preaching ministry, little did I know that we would end up in Manila.

And when I was in Manila, little did I ever know that I would live in Canada. When I accepted the appointment to Regent College ten years ago, I really figured that I would stay at Regent College well into my retirement years.

Little did I know that at the age of 61, God would call me to be one of the pastors at an historic church in the core of a great world city.

[31 : 49] He does not give us a master plan for our lives. He gives us himself as bread and water and light.

And step by step unfolds the Father's will for us. You realize, if you read the Gospels carefully, that that's the way it was for Jesus in his own earthly life.

Leslie Newbigin, who lived most of his life in India, writes this, Jesus had no program of his own. He planned no career for himself.

He sought no identity for himself, no image. He simply responded in loving obedience to the will of his Father as it was presented to him in all the accidents, contingencies, and interruptions of daily life in the Roman Empire.

Only thus did Jesus abide in the love of his Father. So the disciple will abide in the love of Jesus by following Jesus along exactly the same road. Disciples will not be concerned to create a career for themselves.

[32 : 52] They will leave that to the wise husbandry of the gardener, who alone knows what pruning, what watering and feeding, what sunshine or rain, warmth or cold is needed to produce the fruity desires.

The disciple will learn obedience by following Jesus in the same kind of moment by moment, obedience to the will of the Father as it is disclosed in the contingent happenings of daily life in the place where God has placed him or her.

This gives me much comfort as I began ministry with you in this city. I have many dreams, as you know, about what First Baptist can be and do at this time.

And you have many dreams. But the only dreams that finally matter are his dreams, right? They're the only dreams that matter. And clearly, following Jesus' dreams will mean change.

How could it be otherwise? We can't follow him down the road unless there is change. And all change is experienced as loss.

[34 : 03] And when we experience loss, the great temptation is to go back to the past, like the Israelites did in the desert. The uncertainty inherent in this journey to the promised land made them want to go back.

They wanted Moses to take them back to the good old days in Egypt. But God in his mercy would not take them back. He had new plans for them. And he was going to guide them into those yet unfolded plans of a good God.

Jesus, the light, knows where he wants to take his church. He knows where he's going. And he will not let us walk in the darkness about his plans.

Which brings us to a fifth implication, the final one for this morning, of Jesus' cosmic claim. If we stay close to him, if we dare to risk and follow him into ever deeper intimacy, we will experience more and more inner cleansing and inner healing.

As the light, he's going to move through the secret places of our hearts, into those shadows of our hearts, into our thought life, into our emotional fantasies.

[35 : 21] And he's going to come up against any and all darkness, and he's going to burn it away. Like radiation therapy, the intensity of the light will burn away the cancer cells of the deepest, darkest places of our lives.

And there will emerge in us what we might then call an inner radiance. As the sun shines on plants, causing them to grow and to mature, so the sun of God shines on us, causing us to mature and to grow into the perfect humanity of Jesus.

Our bodies may decay, but not our souls. There will be this increasing inner radiance. Joyful, joyful, we adore thee.

God of glory, Lord of love, hearts unfold like flowers before thee, 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.

[36 : 39] Let us pray. Where do you need the light to shine today?

In your life? In a loved one's life? I invite you to invite Jesus to the light into those dark places.

Lord Jesus thank you that you know us and you know where we live thank you that you have come as light we pray that you shine more fully in our hearts in the hearts of people we love in the hearts of the people of this city we are not the light and so we cannot make the shining possible you are the light and we trust you to move through the fullness of human existence until one day we all reflect the beauty we see in you amen you