

Shiloh United Methodist Church

[John 7:2, 14; 8:12](#)

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I Am the Light of the World

Worship opener:

Have you ever found yourself suddenly in the dark?

Have you ever been scrambling for the light?

To find a single candle when the power goes out, or to help guide your way when the road gets dark?

A lack of light in our lives can be incredibly disorienting.

Too much light can blind us.

Today as we begin worship I invite you to think about what needs light in your life right now? Where might God, love, vulnerability, or being open to a guiding light might help you take one more step ahead?

Today we continue our exploration of the “I Am” sayings of Jesus found in the gospel of John. With the statement found in John’s gospel where Jesus says, “I am the light of the world.” To best understand this statement we need to understand the context of what is happening in John’s gospel, in Jerusalem where Jesus says

this, and how this statement ties into the larger story of the characters around Jesus.

First, the context. Jesus is in Jerusalem near the temple. The festival of booths, or Sukkot. This is a celebration where the people build temporary dwelling places of wood and cloth, that look like booths or small tent structures. This celebration is to remind the people of the time when they followed God in the wilderness as a pillar of fire. Throughout Jerusalem they build these booths each year, even in the current era, and in Jesus' day they also lit huge torches all around the temple as a reminder of God's light in fire all around them.

These huge torches on the temple mount would have lit up the sky for miles around. A strange fact about the fires is that they were fueled by the undergarments of the temple priests. I don't know why this is so interesting, except that it makes me laugh that priests really didn't like laundry and needed a way to dispose of their dirty laundry. You know what we need more of is festivals where we light a fire under our leaders to remind us of the light of God. Do what you want with this information, but remember the light being created during this festival is important.

Against the backdrop of the Festival of Tabernacles is where the "I am the light of the world" statement is set. People reading this text or listening to these stories in the early church would have some idea of how the temple courtyard was lit with huge torches.

The light from the temples was intense and bright. These fiery lights were a reminder that God was present moving ahead of the people and guiding them toward the promised land. Sukkot continues this traditional remembrance for the Jewish people even today, a tradition of following God's light and guidance.

This conversation about light reminds me of how many children have nightlights. I had one growing up and many of us did have some form of nightlight or comfort for sleeping as a child. We have these things because darkness can be a scary place when you don't know how to explain it, and light seems to be the most primal solution to our comfort.

Light generally is a great comfort to us and it comes from the primal instinct in us. Our primal side knows that predators can lurk in the darkness, and it runs deep into the reptilian part of our brain. We know darkness is something that dulls our senses and makes us nervous because we cannot properly judge the threats around us. Light becomes a comfort because it gives us wider vision to know what dangers lurk nearby and give a sense of knowing where it is safe to take our next step.

For the people first reading this text in John their understanding of light might be distorted. Remember I said the Feast of Tabernacles also involved recognizing the tradition of God following the Hebrew people in the presence of a column of fire and light. The people first reading John would have experienced or heard about the terrible destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD. For many of them the fires of its destruction would be burned into their minds. God was located in that temple. The fires they would remember would not be a reminder of God's power and presence, but instead an image of God's destruction. Jesus' statement in the gospel of John is an attempt to reclaim the light as something good in the lives of God's people.

Diving into the text you will find our passages today are markers giving us context for our study today. Jesus is at the festival of

booths, he begins to teach halfway through, and ends by saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” Let us fill in the gaps in the story. Jesus goes to the festival without others knowing. He goes among the people by sitting in their tabernacles with them enjoying the festival. Halfway through he begins to teach and the authorities try to seize him. However, their guards come back to say, “Jesus’ teachings are pretty good and we don’t know why would should arrest him.” Then the Sanhedrin meet, in violation of their own rules not to meet during the festival, and begin to plan the process of ensuring Jesus is moved toward execution. Jesus then stops people from stoning woman for adultery. After this he shares, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

During rides in our family car a few years ago there came a voice from the back seat, “BRIGHT, IT’S BRIGHT!” My youngest daughter started yelling this when the sun got in her eyes in the early morning or evening. For a while I couldn’t get her to stop and she would scream until we finally went to where the sun was blocked by something. One day I asked her to look the other way. Suddenly the screaming stopped.

Sometimes light in our lives can become too bright. We aren’t ready for the light and it surprises us. Instead of calmly turning away or moving our bodies, so we are not blinded we start yelling at the light. For the leaders that gathered during the Festival of tabernacles and sought to arrest Jesus, the light Jesus was sharing was too bright. Instead of trying to learn gently from Jesus, they withdrew into the darkness and began plotting how they might remove the light. How many times in our lives have we been faced with light, only to choose the dark places for comfort? It is easy to

look back and see where we have turned from the light, but how can we learn from the past to see where Jesus is lighting our future?

In the 1960's George Wallace was the outspoken supporter of segregation and the Governor of Alabama. "He blocked the entrance to the University of Alabama so black students couldn't enter. He directed state troopers to use billy clubs on non-violent protestors, including children. He did this while professing to be a good Christian man. His famous slogan was, "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever."ⁱ

An assassin's bullet paralyzed George Wallace. The injuries caused great pain in George Wallaces life. Through his process of pain he began to understand the harm he had caused to African Americans. He began to seek the forgiveness of the black community on which he had inflicted so much harm.ⁱⁱ Some might say George Wallace's actions were too little, too late. However, I think it is a great reflection of how human's sometimes turn to dark places. Even in the darkest of places Jesus' light can be shown if we are given an opportunity to look for it. Then once we have a glimpse of the light of Christ we can choose to follow it out of the dark places of our lives.

The thing about Christ's light is it is not too little or too much light, God knows exactly the light we need in our lives to come out of the dark, but also how not to blind others by being overwhelming in our light sharing.

As I studied this passage last week, I was also drawn to our human need for darkness. As we begin to study people who are constantly around light, we learn they are overstimulated. People literally can have too much light and darkness becomes a balancing factor. Have

you ever felt like you had too much light? Like my daughter in the car. It hurts, and getting back into the darkness can allow you to center, escape the pain and then emerge when you are ready. I believe the light Jesus' was talking about is always just the brightness to help us take the next step in our life journey. Jesus is not too bright, and not too dim. Jesus' I think knew this when he said the statement against the flaming torches bright on the temple and while people were plotting in dark places not listening to gentle nudges of light.

Many of us know the story of Apollo 13. In the stories there is this great statement by mission commander, Jim Lovell, about a time when he had just the right amount of light.

We watched the video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N91ogCGpYl0>

The piece we didn't hear in this passage is that Jim Lovell was actually terrified to go up that night, telling his commanding officer he didn't think he was ready. In an effort to have some comfort, Lovell actually wired his own map light to plug into the plane's electrical panel. This fight to have too much light is what caused the short circuit in the cockpit lights. Without losing everything he never would have found the subtle light that led him home.ⁱⁱⁱ

The author of our study for Lenten study, Rob Fuquay refers to this concept as flashlight faith. We only need Jesus to be a flashlight showing us the next step, not a floodlight showing us all the way to the end, nor is Jesus totally absent leaving us in the dark. Jesus is just enough to get us to God, our home.

Let's go back to the gospel, do you know what Jesus did before he publically began to share message of light and hope? He spent time gently taking part in the Festival of the Tabernacles. We can assume during the first half of the feast he went from personal home to personal home and sat to eat with individuals. Christ is always willing to be a gentle night-light in our lives and this is the most comforting way to feel God's love, gently, step by step.

For others of us Christ light will be blinding at first, and it can be tempting to react by running to the dark. However, if we can learn to just turn our heads and reach out with our hearts then God will hold our hand. Jesus will guide us into his tabernacle sit down and share with us a vision of God's love in our lives.

The invitation for this week is that we take time to search for God's light in our lives and see where God is guiding us next.

Blessings during your Lenten journey and Amen.

ⁱ Fuquay, Rob (2014-10-03). The God We Can Know: Exploring the "I Am" Sayings of Jesus (Kindle Locations 626-628). Upper Room Books. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/09/16/opinion/forgiving-george-wallace.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.space.com/20320-astronaut-jim-lovell-apollo-13-biography.html>