



CHURCH of
the SAVIOUR

“I Am the Light of the World”

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John 8:12-15

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Have you ever been camping? This is the time of year when kids are planning their time at church camp and looking forward to summer. It always stirs emotional memory for me, because some of my best memories growing up came at church camp. Those days were filled with fun and laughter and discovery, and they helped me to experience Christ in a different way than I did in Sunday School or in the day-to-day life of my church.

Often later in the summer, after the church camp cycle, my family would go camping just by ourselves at Guilford Lake in Columbiana County. As much as I loved the daily activity schedule and all the fun with friends at church camp, camping with my family was a slower, quieter, more restful experience. We had a popup camper for a few years, but before that we just stayed in a tent. There’s nothing quite like waking up in the morning as the mist is rising over the lake, stirring the fire, and starting up the camp stove for breakfast.

Campgrounds have designated spaces for tents and campers, with restrooms and shower houses centrally located for convenience. They don’t feel particularly convenient when you need to use the bathroom in the middle of the night, though, after drinking too much lemonade before going to bed. When nature calls and it’s completely dark, you rely on a flashlight to help you make your way to the bathroom, over tree roots and pinecones and around obstacles. When you shine a flashlight, it doesn’t illuminate the entire path all the way to your destination. If it did, you’d probably really annoy your camping neighbors. The flashlight creates just enough light for a few steps ahead, making it clear where to place your foot next and revealing the path little by little until you reach the place you are going.

I think about that when I read Psalm 119:105 – “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” The Psalmist says that God’s Word lights the way before us. But that doesn’t mean it reveals to us the entire trajectory of our lives or each moment we’ll experience. Like a flashlight on a dark night, the Word of God helps us to know where to take our next step. It is a lamp for our feet and a light for our path, just when we need it. While we might sometimes wish God would reveal everything that will happen to us along the way, learning to trust God’s guidance each day is actually a more helpful discipline. Seeing the whole span of our lives would be overwhelming to us. But learning to trust God to guide us in each moment and each day can show us the path to take and help us find our way back when we stray from it.

In the eighth chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus declares, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me won’t walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” Like the other “I am” passages, Jesus uses this moment to reveal God’s presence in him. And like the other “I am” passages, it is helpful for us to encounter this saying within the surrounding context.

This story comes at the conclusion of the festival of Sukkot, one of three major festivals for Jewish people. Sukkot closely follows Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, and it marks the pinnacle of the harvest before the rainy season begins. During Sukkot, people are encouraged to build a *sukkah*, a three-walled structure with leafy branches to form the roof. These *sukkot* are reminders of the migrant existence of the Hebrew people wandering in the wilderness for 40 years after the Exodus. The branches that form the roof are meant to provide some shade from the sun while also allowing rain to pass through and the stars to be visible at night, all reminders of God’s provision during the Israelite sojourn. During the Festival of Sukkot, Jewish people are encouraged to eat their meals in the *sukkah* and even to sleep there if they can. Many observant Jews today have a *sukkah* at their synagogue and some build one at their own home. You probably have neighbors who observe this practice in the fall. Thanks to my friends Rabbi Steve Segar and Rabbi Jonathan Cohen for helping me to understand the meaning of Sukkot and how it was celebrated during the Second Temple Period in which Jesus lived.

On the first night of Sukkot in First Century Jerusalem, giant candelabra in the Court of Women at the Temple would be lighted. These candelabra each supported four basins high in the air, each of which was filled with nearly ten

gallons of oil and set alight. The *Mishnah* records that they cast so much light that there was “not a courtyard in Jerusalem that was not illuminated.” (*Mishnah Sukkah* 5:3) The lighting kicked off a night of dancing, music, and celebration. Men would juggle torches as they sang praises to God, further adding to the light. Such was the festive atmosphere that night that the *Mishnah* records that if one had not experienced the celebration, he “never saw rejoicing in his lifetime.” (*Mishnah Sukkah* 5:1)

Only a few days later, at the conclusion of the festival, Jesus said to the crowd around him, “I am the light of the world.” Those who heard him would have remembered the light on the first night of Sukkot, visible all throughout Jerusalem, pouring light into the darkness. They also would have remembered the words of scripture, that God’s Word is a lamp and a light. That’s because the end of Sukkot marks the end of one Torah cycle and the beginning of the next. It’s a big celebration itself, the *Simchat Torah*, and it would become increasingly central to the life of Jewish people after the destruction of the Temple. During *Simchat Torah*, the Torah scroll is brought out of the ark and carried in festive procession around the synagogue. Proverbs 6:23 is read during the celebration. It reads, “For the commandment is a lamp and instruction (*torah*) is a light; corrective teaching is the path of life.” Light and life are themes associated with *Torah*, God’s instruction to God’s people. Both are evoked in Jesus’s words.

When Jesus said, “*I am* the light of the world,” he was revealing God’s presence manifest in him, as in the other “I am” sayings in John. His declaration was not only that the light of God is reflected by him, but that in him is the fulfillment of God’s instruction, the life-giving Word to God’s people. Jesus came both to fulfill and embody *Torah*, the Word of light and life. These words also echo the claim John makes about Christ in the opening chapter of his gospel. “In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” (John 1:4-5)

Jesus is the God we can know. He is the light that shines in the darkness, the light that reveals the presence of God, the light that illumines our path. The light of Christ isn’t a festival or a symbol; it isn’t a reading or a ritual. Christ *himself* is the light, the embodiment of God’s own self. Each of us, everyone, everywhere, any time, can experience God’s presence and God’s guidance by knowing Jesus. This is Good News.

Light is highly symbolic throughout the Bible. It is the very first manifestation of God’s creative word in Genesis 1, when God declares, “Let there be light.” Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, light is equated with life and darkness with death, though it is also clear that God’s power extends over both light and darkness. Darkness does not disappear in the presence of light, but remains in contrast with it. Psalm 23, one of the most treasured passages in scripture, makes this clear. It does not say, “*if* I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,” but “*though* I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.” God’s light serves as a guide for God’s people in the midst of darkness, as Isaiah told the people living in exile:

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined. (Isaiah 9:2)

In the Gospel of John, light and darkness are cosmic forces, but both are always present. John is careful to say that the darkness does not overcome light, but he doesn’t say light makes darkness disappear. Indeed, it is in the midst of darkness that Christ’s light shines brightest.

We are living in a time of deep darkness: A global pandemic that has taken the lives of over six million people worldwide, approaching one million in the United States alone. Political and personal division that renders neighbors and family members unable speak to one another. A reckoning with over 400 years of racism and the legacy that still inhabits our structures and systems. Widespread mistrust of police and public safety, which puts their own safety in jeopardy. A worsening global climate crisis with little serious attention given to what we must do to change or even slow the human behaviors that threaten the very existence of life. A war raging in Ukraine with tremendous loss of life and the fear that it could embroil the entire region or the whole world. Global migration on a scale the world has never seen, the result of conflict and famine, met not with compassion and hospitality but with rhetoric and fear. That list doesn’t even include the personal experiences of pain and loss we all face in our own lives.

Is there light to be found in such darkness as we experience today? I declare to you that there is. For I believe that when Jesus said, “I am the light of the world,” he meant it. And not just for the people living in Jerusalem at the end of Sukkot, not just for the disciples who followed him around Judea, not just for some people in some time, but for *all*

people in *all* times, and yes, even for us today. I cannot tell you how your life will unfold. I cannot tell you what turns the path will take. I cannot tell you what suffering we may face or when death will come. All I know is that like that flashlight in the darkness the path will be illuminated, one step at a time. Jesus is not a magic formula that makes all the challenges in life disappear. He is a constant companion, the God we can know, who will walk beside us and help us to discern the path from the wilderness, who will guide us back to the path when we lose our way, who wants nothing more than to be in us and shine through us even when...no, *especially* when...the darkness closes in around us. And I want you to know that today.

Now, knowing *about* Jesus is good. It's a good place to start. But the God we can know doesn't want us to stop there. God wants to be known to us and by us. In fact, God wants that more than anything. That's why God came to us in Jesus and why Jesus promised us that even after his death and resurrection he would be with us always, even to the end of the age. All it takes is for us to welcome him in, to receive the presence and the light that he offers. If you're longing for that light in your life, don't wait another minute to invite him in. With Christ at the center, your life will be changed, I promise you that. And if you need some help finding the way, your pastors and leaders are here to help. *God wants to be known.*

Whether you've been a follower of Jesus for a lifetime or are just making that commitment today, I want to invite you to join me this week in a practice that will help us to experience the light of Christ each day. Each morning this week, find a place in your house where you can be comfortable and center yourself. Light a candle and offer this simple prayer:

Light of Christ, shine on our path.
Illuminate the darkness
and lead us to the heart of God.¹

You might continue with your morning prayer or Bible reading, or simply meditate in silence for a minute or two. Whatever your morning routine, let's all include that prayer to open our days this week and let the light of Christ illuminate the path before us. You will receive the text and a reminder in an email message going out this afternoon. Please share with me and with each other about that experience and how it changes your perspective as you make your way through the next several days.

One day, the darkness will no longer surround us. One day, every tear will be wiped away. The prophet Isaiah foretold that eternal promise to God's people:

The sun shall no longer be
your light by day,
nor for brightness shall the moon
give light to you by night;
but the Lord will be your everlasting light,
and your God will be your glory.

In the final chapter of the Bible, we receive this promise: "There will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light." (Revelation 22:5) Until that day, darkness remains a constant presence. But we need not fear it nor be overwhelmed by it. For Christ is with us, revealing God's presence to guide us and companion us along the way. Trust in him, and the path will be illuminated, one step at a time. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Adapted from *Companions in Christ* by Debbie J. Baker.