



CHURCH of
the SAVIOUR

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“Glow with God”

July 17, 2022

1 John 1:5-7

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I attended church camp every year from the time I was first age-eligible to attend, somewhere around the fourth grade. I almost always went Camp Aldersgate in Carroll County, the camp that at the time was closest to where we lived. I loved that camp, and it has always been my favorite of the three East Ohio United Methodist Church camps. It has also become the favorite of my kids, which is less convenient these days because it's the furthest of the three from where we live now. Jenn and I love what camping does for our kids, so we're happy to drive the extra distance. (Mira went there a few weeks ago.) Activities like water sports, hiking, cooking over an open fire, and worship in the Chapel in the Woods helped make Jesus real to me through relationships, activities, and encountering God's presence in nature. I'm grateful for all the years of camping and those who gave of their time so generously to help campers experience Christ, and I'm glad my kids get to experience some of that, too.

As much as I loved Camp Aldersgate, the summer between my 8th grade and 9th grade year, I chose a church camp experience unlike any of the other camps I had previously attended. First of all, it was at Camp Asbury, not Aldersgate. And it was called Night Camp, because it focused on things campers can experience at night. Each of the five nights we were there, we stayed up a couple hours later and slept in longer so that, by the end of the week, we stayed up all night. That sounded great to my adolescent self. Not so much today.

Our evening explorations included the standard camp experiences like gathering around a campfire, using our flashlights to navigate, and sharing stories from the Bible plus a few of our own. But it also included things like going on a night hike in a creek, making and eating our meals away from the dining hall and at odd hours, stargazing using a high-powered telescope, and learning to get our bearings using the stars. Camp Asbury is a remote 450-acre camp near Hiram, and our tents were pitched about as far from the main buildings and security lights as you could get. There is nothing like sitting under a blanket of stars on a clear night in a dark sky to make you appreciate just how vast the

universe is. In that darkness, thousands more stars are visible than we see in the suburbs. All those points of light converge as they enter the tiny pupil in our eyes, traversing not only great distance, but time, as well. Light from the nearest star – the sun – takes approximately 8 minutes 17 seconds to reach the earth. From the nearest star to the sun, it takes about 4.2 years. From the other side of our galaxy, it takes as much as 100,000 years for light to reach us. And that's just *our* galaxy. The Hubble space telescope revealed approximately *100 billion* galaxies in the observable universe.¹ (*James Webb*) I can't begin to fathom how far away some of those stars are from us. And yet, the light they produce is powerful enough – or was powerful enough at one time – to reach all the way to us. Some of those stars are dormant or long gone by the time their light reaches us. Some have been gone for many years – the light just didn't reach us until millennia after they went dark. Remarkable.

“God is light and there is no darkness in him at all.” I'm sure that we read those words at Night Camp (by flashlight!). Each night, we shared teachings from God's Word and shared what God might be saying to us through our experience. We were reminded that in the light of God's presence, we too become light. That doesn't happen on our own, but by God's grace. John doesn't say “Andy is light, and so long as he continues to do the right things, he'll continue to walk in the light.” Try as I might, I can never shine on my own. I am not the source of the light and never can be. I am a creature, not the Creator. And because of that, I'm subject to all the flaws and failings that come with being human. I will be selfish and stubborn and arrogant and greedy and short-tempered and lazy, even when I don't intend to be any of those things. I won't be all those things all the time or at the same time, at least I hope not. But those forces are always lurking nearby, drawing me toward choices and actions that God doesn't want for me. If I say that isn't happening, according to John, I'm deceiving myself. And if I deny that and attempt to be a good person on my own merits, I am not in the light. But thanks be to God, if I confess that I'm not all that on my own and open myself to God's presence, the saving grace of Jesus makes me right with God and allows me to walk in the light. And God's light helps me to be generous and patient and humble and loving and kind. I won't get it right all the time, but seeking God's heart and trusting in that grace will help me get there at least some of the time, and more often as I ground myself in God's

¹ <https://www.space.com/25303-how-many-galaxies-are-in-the-universe.html#:~:text=Researchers%20dubbed%20this%20the%20eXtreme,%2C%20Livio%20told%20Space.com.>

presence to lead me and guide me. That is the light in which we are all invited to walk. And God's light is always seeking us.

God is as big as that canopy of stars that extends billions of light years from us, but close enough for that light to reach all the way to where we are, into the tiny little aperture of our pupil, where we can see and recognize God's action, revealed in the incredible majesty of God's creation. When I stop to think about that, it just blows my mind. I think about the Psalmist who wrote, "When I look at the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established, what are humans that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" Can it really be that a God so immense and so powerful to create billions of stars in billions of galaxies can see and know *me*, that God wants to be in relationship with *me*? It's an incredible, audacious claim, but that's exactly the claim that scripture makes. And it's a presence I have felt and continue to feel throughout my life, whether it's sitting under the stars or watching the joy of discovery in the eyes of a toddler, hiking on a wooded trail after a fresh rain or watching people of varied interests and backgrounds and ideas come together and become the body of Christ we call the church, watching the waves crash relentlessly upon the rocks along the shores of Lake Erie or see a bunch of teenagers transform from kids staring at cellphones and awkward in their changing bodies and struggling to figure out who they are and what they want to do into the agents of Christ on mission trip, building ramps and repairing homes and leading worship and praying for and with each other. "If we live in the light in the same way as he is in the light, we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from every sin."

Summer camp helped me experience both the enormity of God and the intimacy of God. After standing together under a blanket of stars, taking turns looking through a telescope to investigate the craters of the moon and the rings of Saturn, and hiking back together on a trail through trees older than my living relatives, we sat together around a fire and shared reflections on what we had experienced. There's something about sitting around a campfire that opens a different door into your heart. As the logs crackle and the embers glow, sparks rising into the darkness above, you can sense that there's so much more going on in life than the things we usually take time to observe. And learning to listen to the wonderings and experiences of others in the circle, the pieces start to fit together. Faith becomes less abstract, more tangible. I think I began to know, even if only for a brief time, why John Wesley believed we could be made perfect

in love in this life. In the glow of a campfire in the wee hours of the morning, even the annoying kids become a little less annoying and more a reflection of God. God made all of this and somehow keeps it all working together. And yet that same God loves me and wants to know me and be known by me. And the same thing is happening in the hearts of everyone else around that circle. And it's happening in your heart right now.

There's a song we used to sing every year, a song many campers have sung in similar settings for a long time. Maybe you know it from your own camping experience, or you've heard it and sung it in a different setting. For me, every time I hear it or sing it, I go right back to a fire circle with a marshmallow on a stick or a pie iron over the coals, seeing the light playing in the faces of fellow campers.

It only takes a spark to get a fire going

And soon all those around can warm up in its glowing

That's how it is with God's love once you've experienced it

You spread God's love to everyone; you want to pass it on.

At this age, my church camp days are mostly behind me, though I still love to sit around a fire with family and friends. It doesn't take a fire circle or a cabin in the woods for us to experience the love of God in that way, though I know it has helped those of us who've been blessed enough to experience it. The light of God is more than a faint glow from a distant star or an ember coming to life when we blow on it. It's a light that shines in the hearts of everyone who finds faith in God and opens themselves to be carriers of that light into the world.

In the fourth chapter of 2 Corinthians, Paul wrote: "For it is God who said, 'Light will shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." God's light shines in our hearts so we can begin to understand the love God has for us and the gift of God's grace in Jesus. Paul went on to say that God trusts us with the responsibility of passing that light on, even though God knows how fragile and error prone we are. That's by design, because we don't want to think or for other people to think that we are anything special on our own. We are only "clay jars" as Paul puts it, but we're capable of reflecting the light and even carrying it with us.

I pray that you experience that light in your heart today. As the final verse of the song goes, "I wish for you, my friend, this happiness that I've found." The light of God is all around us. We can see it in the stars above, in the early morning sunrise, and in the faces and hearts of those around us. That light shines in you, too. Look for it. Be attentive to it. Invite God to make it grow. With God's help, the light will shine strongly in you so you can glow with God and help others to find the light, too. Amen.