

I AM – The Light of the World

John 8:12-20
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First Presbyterian Church
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Someone once said, “A generation which fails to transmit the light from one age to the next does not pass on nothing, it transmits darkness.”

The first state visit of a Soviet leader to the US was in 1959, when Nikita Khrushchev visited America. During a press conference, the first question from the floor was: “Today you talked about the hideous rule of your predecessor, Stalin. You were one of his closest aides and colleagues during those years. What were you doing all that time?” Khrushchev’s face got red. “Who asked that?” he roared. All five hundred faces turned down. “Who asked that?” he insisted. Nothing. “That’s what I was doing,” he said. Nothing. In other words, throughout Stalin’s brutal reign as dictator of the Soviet Union and all the terror and death he caused, even to his own citizens, Khrushchev sat in the shadows doing nothing.¹

In today’s New Testament lesson, Jesus stands up against the brutality of the world, shining light into the darkness so that all might see a better way forward. This comes right after the Pharisees tried to brutally execute a woman caught in adultery, by stoning her to death. Amid such a dark and unjust legal system, Jesus says to the crowds and to the Pharisees, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” Jesus’ judgment brings life, not death. And yet, the Pharisees are more committed to their brand of judgment, saying to Jesus, “You are testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is not valid.”

The Pharisees are anxious to find someone guilty of something – if not the woman caught in adultery then Jesus caught in blasphemy, claiming to be the Messiah, the Messiah foretold by the Prophet Isaiah, when he said, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, ... on them light has shined.” We need light in this world. We need it to shine in our hearts, shine across this land of ours, shine throughout the world. Sadly and tragically, there is far too much darkness in this world – like in Russia today – and far too much darkness in our nation, too much darkness our lives.

Jesus came to overcome the darkness, darkness that sets nation against nation, one political party against the other, brother against brother, child against parent – the darkness that allows our good intentions to get driven under by temptation, complacency and neglect of calling as followers of Christ.

¹ As told by Warren Bennis, *On Becoming a Leader* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1989), 195.

We're all guilty of it – turning our backs on the light of Jesus. Jesus tries to show us the way forward, to pierce the darkness in our hearts, give us clarity of vision, warmth in our relationships. And too often, one way or another, either actively or passively, we fail follow the light of Christ.

The Pharisees were actively turning their backs on Jesus. The reason they actively rejected him and his teachings is because they were comfortable and happy where they were, no matter how dark and difficult life was for others.

When we fail to see things in light of Christ, we and all the world sit in darkness. As it says earlier in John, chapter 3, "... This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil."

Light always seeks out darkness, in order to overcome it. This is why Jesus says to the Pharisees, "I am the light of the world." He says it to challenge the darkness in their hearts, shine light on the oppression of their social hierarchy, and overturn their corrupt system of justice.

When the Pharisees reject Jesus' testimony that he is the Light of the World, Jesus takes the dispute to a higher court. He says, "... My testimony is valid because I know where I have come from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going." You see Jesus places the matter before God. He came from God the Father and he returns to God the Father. God alone is the righteous judge. This I know, says Jesus, but you do not know. "You judge by human standards; I judge" by "the Father who sent me."

In the early 1960s, the Christian author C.S. Lewis said, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else."

It is by the light of Christ that all is rightly judged, clearly seen. The Pharisees judged the woman caught in adultery by human, earthly standards; Jesus judged her in light of his compassion and forgiveness, saying to her, "Go and sin no more."

The Pharisees judged Jesus by their earthly laws; Jesus judges the Pharisees – and us – in the light of the one who sent him, God the Father. Those who live in light of Jesus have forgiveness because they see the error of their ways. They have acceptance because they see themselves and others as brothers and sisters in Christ. The light of Jesus provides clarity because we see things as they are. In the light of Jesus we have clear boundaries, as we strive always to stay clear of the darkness.

The Rev. Howard Chapman of First Presbyterian in Marion, Iowa, notes that in some parts of the world it is very dangerous to walk in darkness. When Chapman was a young boy his parents were missionaries in West Africa.

In West Africa, flashlights are very important. For one thing, there are no streetlights, so the flashlight keeps you from tripping and falling. But the other problem in West Africa is snakes, deadly venomous snakes. Chapman remembers one night walking with his mother along a very dark path. He kept bugging her to let him carry the flashlight. Finally she agreed, but told him it was not a toy and that they needed to be careful because of the snakes. Of course, Chapman started shining the light – not on the path – but toward the underbrush and long grass that was off the path. His mother snatched the light from him, asking, “What do you think you’re doing.” “Looking for snakes,” he said. “No,” said his mother, “we are not looking for snakes. We are looking at the path.... If we see something, we stop. It will be afraid of the light and will go off into the dark. When it is safe, we go on. But the light must always shine on the path ahead.”

Jesus said, “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” Jesus lights up the path directly in front of us, showing us when it is safe to take the next step. Sometimes we get impatient and go ahead of Jesus. Other times, we stop cold, staring into the dark underbrush, terrified by the dangers that might be there. And that’s when Jesus says to us, “Look here! Your next step is perfectly safe. Come on. Follow me; I am the light.” Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of light and love, we come with gratitude to this place of prayer. For family and friends and friends who are family, we offer you our thanks and praise.

Especially, we thank you for those who show us your way through the light of their love.

We offer our gratitude for our church family worshiping here this morning, even as your Spirit connects us with our church family worship from home.

In these moments of quiet, grant us the courage to let so lose ourselves that we might truly find ourselves in you.

Lead us in the way of truth that we might honestly see the gifts we have, and then grant us the strength to share our gifts with others.

Let the light of your love so shine in our own lives that the dark times in the lives of others might be brightened. And may that brilliance be a beacon of hope for those who sit in darkness.

We pray, too, Lord upon whom dark times have come, and especially those dealing with illness, disease and disability. We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ, whose light leads the way and warms the weary, and who taught us to pray together, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.