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John 8:12

Twenty-fourth Message

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THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

Some of you may have heard this true story already, but it still grabs our attention:

In "U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings," the magazine of the Naval Institute, Frank Koch illustrates the importance of obeying the Laws of the Lighthouse. Two battleships assigned to the training squadron had been at sea on maneuvers in heavy weather for several days. I was serving on the lead battleship and was on watch on the bridge as night fell. The visibility was poor with patchy fog, so the captain remained on the bridge keeping an eye on all activities.

Shortly after dark, the lookout on the wing reported, "Light, bearing on the starboard bow." "Is it steady or moving astern?" the captain called out. The lookout replied, "Steady, Captain," which meant we were on a dangerous collision course with that ship. The captain then called to the signalman, "Signal that ship: 'We are on a collision course, advise you change course twenty degrees.'" Back came the signal, "Advisable for you to change course twenty degrees." The captain said, "Send: 'I'm a captain, change course twenty degrees.'" "I'm a seaman second-class," came the reply. "You had better change course twenty degrees." By that time the captain was furious. He spat out, "Send: 'I'm a battleship. Change course twenty degrees.'" Back came the flashing light, "I'm a lighthouse." We changed course.¹

Confronted with a lighthouse, even a battleship has to alter its course. How about us? When we are confronted not with a lighthouse but with the "Light of the world," as Jesus describes himself in chapter 8 of the gospel of John, what should we do? Listen to his words:

Then Jesus again spoke to them, saying, "I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life." (John 8:12 NASB)

This verse actually proceeds from 7:52 since, as we saw last week, the story of the woman caught in adultery is not part of the original text.

The setting is the Feast of Tabernacles. Thousands of pilgrims have gathered in Jerusalem for the greatest and most popular of all the Jewish feasts. There has been much debate by the religious leadership with Jesus and a great deal of speculation as to his identity. The leaders are trying to find a way to arrest him, while the common people are trying to determine who he is. On the last day of the feast, Jesus is still in the temple, in the treasury, in fact, according to verse 20. The treasury, probably located in the Court of the Women, was where the offerings were placed.

Once more, Jesus addresses the people. In 7:37-38 we read that on the last day of the feast, Jesus cried out, saying that he was

the water of life: "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.'" Now Jesus speaks again, proclaiming that he is the light of the world.

This is the second of seven "I am" statements in the gospel that has a predicate. The first comes in 6:35, where Jesus states that he is the bread of life. Here he declares that he is the "Light of the world." Our task is to try and understand what he means by this. The words are simple, but unpacking their meaning is not an easy task. What is light? What is darkness? What does Jesus mean by these words?

You might recall that when Jesus used the metaphor of water in chapter 7, he was connecting himself with a water ritual that was very significant to the Feast of Tabernacles. The same kind of connection existed between light and the festival. Four huge candelabras, each seventy-five high and filled with bowls of oil, stood in the Court of the Women. During the festival, these massive candelabras would light up the city of Jerusalem. The feast was a time of great rejoicing, more so than any other event. A great celebration would take place under these lights, with people dancing through the night. Here is the context in which Jesus says that he is the Light of the world. On one level, he is redefining this element of the feast in himself, declaring that he is the light under which God's people can dance and rejoice. Even at night, God's people are not encumbered by darkness.

Let's take a few moments to review some of the many references to light in the Old Testament. On the first day of creation, we read in Genesis, "God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light" (Gen 1:3). Light was the first element of creation. Up until then there was only darkness. The light was called good, and God separated the light from the darkness. God brought the light into the darkness.

Exodus too has many references to light. Recall that the Feast of Tabernacles was also connected to the Exodus:

The LORD was going before them in a pillar of cloud by day to lead them on the way, and in a pillar of fire by night to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. (Exod 13:21)

When the Jews left Egypt, Pharaoh's army pursued them but the pillar of cloud and pillar of fire protected God's people.

The imagery of light is frequently used in the poetry of the Psalter. In Psalm 27, light is associated with salvation. The God who creates also saves:

**The LORD is my light and my salvation;
Whom shall I fear? (Ps 27:1)**

We read in Psalm 44 that it was the light of God's presence that delivered the Israelites from their enemies, not their own strength:

**For by their own sword they did not possess the land,
And their own arm did not save them,
But Your right hand and Your arm and the light of Your presence,
For You favored them. (Ps 44:3)**

Light is associated with grace in compassion in Psalm 112, while in Psalm 119 it is associated with God's word which reveals truth and exposes darkness:

**Light arises in the darkness for the upright;
He is gracious and compassionate and righteous. (Ps 112:4)**
**Your word is a lamp to my feet
And a light to my path. (Ps 119:105)**

Isaiah says that the Suffering Servant would be a light to the nations, as Israel was designed to be:

**He says, "It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant
To raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel;
I will also make You a light of the nations
So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth." (Isa 49:6)**

Light is also connected with eschatological promise. A day was coming when light would be a permanent fixture because of the presence of God:

**"No longer will you have the sun for light by day,
Nor for brightness will the moon give you light;
But you will have the LORD for an everlasting light,
And your God for your glory.
Your sun will no longer set,
Nor will your moon wane;
For you will have the LORD for an everlasting light,
And the days of your mourning will be over." (Isa 60:19-20)**

Amazingly, the prophet Zechariah makes reference to both of these metaphors of light and water used by Jesus in chapters 7 and 8:

**In that day there will be no light; the luminaries will dwindle.
For it will be a unique day which is known to the LORD,
neither day nor night, but it will come about that at evening time there will be light. And in that day living waters will flow out of Jerusalem, half of them toward the eastern sea and the other half toward the western sea; it will be in summer as well as in winter. And the LORD will be king over all the earth; in that day the LORD will be the only one, and His name the only one. (Zech 14:6-9)**

The book of Revelation has the same picture of water and light:

Then He said to me, "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost." (Rev 21:6)

And the city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. (Rev 21:23-24)

Notice the correspondence between light and life in the words of Jesus. He is the light of life. In other words, the light of Jesus is the source of life. And this light is life-giving, says John: "In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men" (John 1:4). The psalmist adds "For with You is the fountain of life; In Your light we see light" (Ps 36:9).

Light is a metaphor for God's presence, protection and salvation, leading and truth. Light is an attribute, a description of God himself. Later John will write that "God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). God is light, and Jesus is the "Light of the world." John uses this term "the world" to refer to that part of creation that is in active rebellion against God. Men prefer to walk in darkness and turn away from God. Yet it is into this world that God shines his light, the light of his son. "There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man" (John 1:9).

Mankind can't live without light. Things do not grow without light. Light signifies warmth, protection, safety and hope. The things that we associate with darkness are the opposite of light: evil rather than goodness, death rather than life, danger rather than safety, cold rather than warmth, fear rather than trust. We reassure our children by leaving a light on in the middle of the night. We grow depressed as the hours of daylight decrease in the winter and rejoice as they lengthen from spring into summer. Following the long winter, we bask in the warmth of the sunlight. The light of day dispels the doubts, confusion, loneliness, despair and boredom of the night.

In my early years, light and darkness took a prominent role in my mind even though I wasn't a Christian. In high school I used these metaphors to describe my feelings about life. I thought of my life as being a dark tunnel, but I could see a faint light away in the distance and wanted to move toward it. However, before I moved toward the light I first moved further and further into darkness and death. It wasn't until the end of my college years that the light of Christ shined on me. Light and darkness aptly describe our spiritual journey.

Perhaps this will help you understand the magnitude of what Jesus is saying. He is making a claim of cosmic significance. He is the fulfillment of the Feast of Tabernacles. He is the light that provides safety and guidance in our exodus journey. He is the Suffering Servant who gives light to the nations. He is the one in whose warmth we can bask. He is the one who gives life, and in his presence we grow and blossom into maturity. He is the one who fulfills eschatological expectations. In the new heavens and new earth he will be the lamp that gives eternal, constant light.

Jesus is not only laying claim to being the light, he is doing so in such a way that connects him to the God who declared his name to Moses as "I AM," "I AM THAT I AM." This name, which is a verb not a noun, means that this God is alive and life-giving, personal and relational, present and intimate, mysterious and uncontrollable. This is the God who proved his sovereignty over the

greatest civilization on earth and all its impotent gods. This is the God who delivered his people from the clutches of the most powerful and wealthy nation on earth. As chapter 8 unfolds, Jesus will bring more and more clarity to his connection with the God who called himself “I AM.” The Jews will fully understand that Jesus is claiming to be the revelation of this God, and they will attempt to stone him.

In the same way that a lighthouse can create a crisis for a battleship, so the light of Jesus can create a crisis for our own lives, even if we are believers. Jesus says that if we follow him we will not walk in darkness—the darkness of evil, doubt, confusion, self-hatred and unworthiness—but we will walk in the light of life. He doesn’t say that if we sign a theological statement we will not walk in darkness. He doesn’t say that if we go to church that we will not walk in darkness. He says if we follow him our life will be characterized by light and life.

Are we responding to the light or are we choosing to remain in darkness? My plan for today was to continue through to verse 30 of this chapter, but for some reason I could not get past this verse. So let us consider how we walk in the light.

The Light of Freedom

Are we walking in the light of freedom or in the darkness of slavery? In Romans, Paul says that the wages of sin is death. We know that sin leads to slavery, yet it is hard for us to turn away from the darkness to the light. Not only does sin lead us into darkness, law does as well. Consider that the Feast of Tabernacles is associated with the Exodus, the deliverance of Israel out of Egypt, guided by God’s light. Jesus is the new Moses who leads a second exodus for God’s people, guiding them out of darkness into the light. The first exodus was a deliverance out of slavery to Egypt; the second exodus is a deliverance out of Torah, i.e., religion and law. The Torah teachers and moral gurus of Israel were causing God’s people to walk in darkness. There was no life to be found in the letter of the law. There never has and there never will be. What Jesus is saying here is, “Follow me into the light of freedom from both sin and law.”

The Light of Forgiveness

Are we walking in the light of God’s forgiveness? Are we traveling light or are we burdened with regret and shame? As I look back over my life this is what trips me up more than anything else. I can become obsessed with the things I have done and the things I didn’t do. The enemy attacks me with the sins of my youth, and when I listen that leads me into darkness, especially at three o’clock in the morning.

Most of us have some dark secrets and haunting memories. We are scared to bring them out into the open, so we stay in the darkness and don’t allow the light of Christ to heal our hearts. The ironic thing is that if people knew our deepest secrets, no one would be shocked and no one would turn away from us. We would be accepted, loved and embraced by fellow sinners and this community would be healthier and more vibrant as a result. True confession allows us to walk in the tenderness of God’s forgiveness. That is what happened when the light of Jesus shone into the eyes of the woman caught in adultery. Jesus has taken all

of our sins, past, present and future, and thrown them into the sea—and he has posted a sign that says, “No fishing.”

Around this time last year I had just returned from a wonderful weekend retreat with some young men. I hadn’t taken much time for myself, so on Monday I took the opportunity to spend time alone with God. God told me to go to a certain place that was associated with the darkest sin of my life. As I walked and prayed, I felt Jesus’ wonderful presence. God’s Spirit lifted a burden that I had carried for over thirty years and he began to heal my memories. I truly felt God’s forgiveness and I could forgive myself. This is what the light of Jesus does.

The Light of Joy and Rejoicing

Are we walking in the light of God’s joy? This is what characterized the Feast of Tabernacles—dancing and singing throughout the night under the light of the four giant candelabras. It was one huge party. Have you ever been invited to a party or a dinner, and the fact that you knew that all your friends would be there filled you with excitement and anticipation? You knew it was going to be so much fun that you just couldn’t wait. Have you ever attended a wedding and there was so much rejoicing that you couldn’t help but dance, even though you don’t know how to dance?

My son is in the process of getting married. I say process, because the wedding began in October in Romania and will come to completion here in March. This whole event has brought me so much joy. This is the kind of joy we experience as the bride of Christ. We look forward to that great wedding feast in the future. This is the kind of joy that characterized the party that the Father threw for his prodigal son upon his return. This is the kind of joy we experience in our hearts when the light of Christ shines on us and we receive the Holy Spirit. To follow Jesus and live in the light is to experience rejoicing.

The Light of the New Creation

Light is a prominent feature of the old creation, but it takes on even greater significance in the new creation, as is clearly seen in the passages we quoted from Zechariah, Isaiah and Revelation. This transient world is giving way to something much grander and glorious. Our world can be very dark at times. It can control our actions and affect our moods. We can get all caught up in what is or is not happening here on planet earth. But Jesus is the “Light of the world” which delivers us from this world and ushers us into the kingdom of God, the new creation, even though we do not yet see it fully.

Living in the light of the new creation allows us to travel light, unencumbered by the world. This world is not our home; we are only passing through. Successes don’t mean so much. Failures don’t hurt so much. We can hold things loosely. The light of the new creation helps us see what is truly important.

The Light of Suffering

This might seem a strange juxtaposition of words, but consider the fact that the O.T. books that mention the word light most often are Job, Isaiah, and Psalms—books about exile, suffering and worship. On a human level, the darkest time in human history was the day when Jesus was crucified and the sun became dark.

And yet, from God's point of view, that was the time when the light shone the brightest. The suffering of Jesus yielded the greatest gift the world has even known.

Viewing our suffering under the light of Christ, we realize that these times too can become God's greatest gift. In the light of suffering we find a tender God who loves us and wants to be intimate with us. In those dark nights of the soul, the light of Jesus becomes purer and more life-giving.

While I have not suffered as much as some, I fight suffering with every bone in my body. From a human perspective I view the suffering, the disappointments and the results of sin as things that have prevented me from being what I want to be or living the way I want to live. But when I observe these with the light of Christ, I see all of them, even the sin in my life, as gifts of God that bring into the light the face of God.

The Light of God's Love

Are we walking in the light of God's love? The darkness tells us that we are not worthy, that we are no good, that we don't deserve to be loved. But the light of Christ dispels these lies. God accepts and loves right now the way we are. We don't have to get our act together, we don't have to succeed at being a Christian, we don't have to get the approval of our church. We will never be more loved by God than we are right now, at this very moment.

The darkness is always going to pull us in different directions—the pull to be successful, powerful or wealthy; the pull to be jealous and prideful; the pull to experience empty and life-robbing sexual encounters; the pull to be dissatisfied with our weaknesses and imperfections; the pull to define our spiritual life in our good behavior. But to each of us Jesus says, "Follow me. Walk in my light. Come to me in your weakness, your brokenness, with your heartaches and broken dreams, and let my light shine on you. Take me with you as you walk through the day and I will light your path and give you life."

Comparing Christianity with other religions based on external law, Leo Tolstoy wrote this:

A man who professes an external law is like someone standing in the light of a lantern fixed to a post. It is light all round him, but there is nowhere further for him to walk. A man who professes the teaching of Christ is like a man carrying a lantern before him on a long, or not so long, pole: the light is in front of him, always lighting up fresh ground and always encouraging him to walk further.²

Jesus is wooing us out of the darkness, promising life in return. But we have to come into the light. Are we willing to change course to avoid a collision? How is Jesus asking you to follow him today?

1. Max Lucado, *In the Eye of the Storm* (Nashville: Word, 1991), 153.
2. Philip Yancey, *Soul Survivor* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 129.

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