

## **The Light of the World**

### **John 8:12-20**

**Call:** Ps 27/Jn 4

**Scripture:** John 1:1-5, 9-13 (ESV)

#### **I. Intro**

I don't know about you, but I was mesmerized by Amanda Gorman's poem, "The Hill We Climb." As you probably know, Amanda Gorman is the young lady who is America's first-ever National Youth Poet Laureate. Although I'm not a poet, I thought her poem was outstanding. She brought in so many images, even a few from Scripture. And, I especially noticed, maybe because of the text today, that she wrapped the poem within the image of light. She began by saying, "When day comes, we ask ourselves where can we find light in this never-ending shade?" And she ended the poem by saying, "For there is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it, if only we're brave enough to be it."

Today, Jesus will claim to be *the* light of the world within "the never-ending shade" of humanity's sin and rebellion.

#### **II. The Feast of Tabernacles**

Well, we continue in our studies in John in chapter 8 this week. This section of John is set during the Feast of Tabernacles, which seems to be important because John gives 3 whole chapters to this feast. During these three chapters, conflict and controversy characterize almost every scene. And, over the last three Sundays, we've moved through the week of the feast.

- The first Sunday, we explored Jesus' initial teaching in the middle of the feast, which caused great division among the people.
- The next Sunday, we moved to the last day of the feast, where Jesus boldly proclaimed those golden words, inviting everyone to drink of his living water.
- Last Sunday, on the day after the feast, we saw this living water wash over a woman caught in adultery.

Today, we pick up the story on the evening of that day. And, although the feast is over, everyone is still living in the glow of the previous week.

#### **A. The Light Ceremony**

That is to say as I've said each week, this feast was easily the highlight of the entire year. It was simply the most joyous party of the year.

There were three key components to this feast:

1. A water ceremony, which happened every morning,
2. A light ceremony, which happened every evening, and
3. A theological affirmation of the presence of God that happened throughout the feast.

We explored the water ceremony two weeks ago. Next week, we'll consider the affirmation of the presence of God. Today, we will study the light ceremony, which was also called the Illumination of the Temple (Isa 9:2).

### **B. Light in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century**

To begin with, we need to imagine ourselves living in the ancient world. In the ancient world, darkness ruled at night. They simply didn't have light at night, except for maybe a few candles or fires here and there. It was pitch black at night. It's hard to understand this in our world where our cities are lit up all night. Nowadays, only when you get away from the city do you experience pitch blackness, like when you're camping or backpacking. Although I do remember experiencing this the first year I went to Liberia in 2009. On the drive from the airport to our place of lodging, I vividly remember thinking how strange it was that there were no lights along the drive.

### **C. The Court of the Women**

The other contextual point to be made is this. At the end of our text today, in verse 20, we are told that Jesus is teaching in the Temple, within the treasury. The treasury is located in the court of the women.

As you traveled into the Temple, you would pass through the Court of the Gentiles where everyone was permitted to go. Then, you would come to an inner court called the court of the women. This is as far as Jewish women could go. And, this is where the Temple treasury was, so it is a very busy place. But it's also the place where there were four giant candlesticks located (two are pictured in this image). Each one was around 75 feet high, with large ladders set up to reach the top of them. On top of each candlestick was four golden bowls. The golden bowls were filled with 65 liters of olive oil. And, in the bowls were enormous wicks made from the undergarments of the priests. It was apparently a great honor for the priests to have their undergarments used in this way. My kids always laughed when I would tell them this point.

And on each evening of the feast, young, healthy priests would ascend each ladder to light each wick of these giant candlesticks. And, they would stay lit all night.

And, these candlesticks were so blazing and bright that one ancient text says that no courtyard in the entire city of Jerusalem was in the dark. Another text says that Jerusalem glistened like a diamond in the night, and was considered "the light of the world" during this feast each year.

And, of course, the people partied all night in the light! They would dance and sing psalms of praise to God all night long. And, you can understand why - at no other time of the entire year was there light at night, and especially this much light. I don't think the Jews slept at all during the week of Tabernacles.

### **D. Remembering**

Now, remember that these feasts are a time to remember and renew. So, what specifically are the people remembering with this light ceremony? In the Old Testament, light primarily symbolized God's presence. Light was and is a fundamental attribute of God. And, because he is light, he can guide. And, since this feast remembered the wilderness wanderings, they remembered God guiding their ancestors through the wilderness with a cloud by day and fire by night. There were obviously no maps back then, and the Sinai Desert had no signs. Therefore, the Israelites needed a guide to get through it. They were saved by the light of God, as Psalm 78 says, *"He divided the sea and led them through; he made the water stand up like a wall. He guided them with the cloud by day and with light from the fire all night"* (Ps 78:13-14).

### **E. Renewing Hope**

Now, just like the water at Horeb, over time, this physical experience became symbolic of future hope:

- The hope for salvation: Psalm 27 says, *"The Lord is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear?"* (Ps 27:1).
- The hope for God's continued guidance:
  - Psalm 119: *"Your word is a lamp to my feet; And a light to my path"* (Ps 119:105).
  - Isaiah 60: *"The sun will no more be your light by day, nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you, for the LORD will be your everlasting light"* (Isa 60:19).
- The hope for Israel fulfilling their mission:
  - Isaiah 60 again: *"And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising"* (Isa 60:3).
- The hope for a coming Messiah, described in Isaiah as a Suffering Servant:
  - Isaiah 42: *"I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations."* (Isa 42:6).
  - And Isaiah 49: *"I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."* (Isa 49:6).

### **F. The Party**

So, all week during the light ceremony, these texts and many more are being read, as the people remember and celebrate God as light and guidance, while also looking forward in hope to a coming Messiah who will bring God's salvation. It happened every night for the entire week.

Now, we're ready to enter our text. We are on the evening after the last day of the feast, in the court of the women. At some point during the day, Jesus had washed his grace and truth over an unnamed woman caught in adultery. And, now, a group has gathered again for his teaching. The court, which would have been ablaze every night of the feast, is now dark.

## **III. The Light of the World (12)**

*12 Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (ESV)*

### **A. The Paraphrase**

Again, what timing on Jesus' part! And, what boldness! If I were to paraphrase what Jesus is saying here, I think he is saying something like this. "You have seen the light of the temple piercing the darkness of the night and illuminating all of Jerusalem for an entire week. Yet, I am the light that illuminates the entire world. For the one who follows me, there will be light, not only for a few nights, but for every night and everyday forever. The light of those large candles was a brilliant light, but in the end, they flickered and died. I am the light that never flickers and never dies."

As a way of understanding better this bold claim, what I want to do now is take each phrase and say a few more words about each one.

### **B. I am the Light of the World**

Jesus begins by saying, *"I am the light of the world."* He doesn't say, the light of Cupertino or Sunnyvale or San Jose. He doesn't say, the light of America or Europe or Asia. He says the entire world! *It is a stunning claim!* As Leslie Newbigin says, "The theme of light is so central and pervasive, both in the Old Testament and in contemporary religion ... that these words could only be understood as conveying a claim of cosmic significance" (Newbigin, 102). Indeed, Jesus literally says that he is the light of the "cosmos," which of course means it's not just about me. It's not just a private moment between Jesus and me. This claim is about the cosmos, the entire world.

And, by saying this claim during the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus more closely connects himself to Yahweh of the Old Testament. It seems then that Jesus was somehow mysteriously present in the light that led the Israelites through the wilderness. Jesus was somehow mysteriously present in the light of the shekinah glory which descended on Solomon's Temple years later. Jesus is somehow mysteriously Isaiah's suffering servant that this nation, indeed the whole cosmos, was hoping for and longing for.

### **C. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness**

Jesus goes on, *"Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness."* We have to follow him. Literally it is to "keep on following" him. As the Israelites had to keep following the cloud and pillar of fire in the wilderness or they would get lost, so we must constantly follow Jesus so we won't get lost within a secular culture. Just as the Israelites had to pick up and move when the cloud and fire moved, so we must pick up and move when he moves. We must remain attentive to what Christ is doing in our lives and follow him, staying right on his heels, remaining in his light. As Michael Reeves joyfully says, "As birds sing the loudest in the light of the sun, so Christians sing the loudest when engulfed in the light of the world" (Reeves, 106).

*"Follow me, and you will not walk in darkness."* Jesus waits until the massive candles go out, and is presumably sitting with the crowd in relative darkness. Darkness is usually not a place

we like to be. As children, we were all scared of the dark, and for good reason. Darkness brings insecurity. Darkness brings fear and worry and anxiety. When I'm backpacking, and I'm laying in the middle of a mountain in my hammock, every noise brings worry. Was that a bear?

Darkness also causes us to trip over things and stumble over things. When we get up in the middle of the night, the first thing we do is turn on a light. Otherwise, we stub our toes and trip over our shoes.

Darkness also brings confusion and disorientation. And, isn't this a picture of our culture, confused and disoriented? As I read the news, I see our culture try to make sense of difficult topics, and I'm always amazed at the confusion. As our culture tries to make sense of morality, sexuality, spirituality and inequity, confusion abounds because the world is in the shade, in the dark. This is the great "gift" of post-modernity – mass confusion. Without the truth of Jesus, the light, everyone has authority. And, when everyone has authority, everything is relative. That results in absolute confusion.

But, I get a sense that people are growing tired of being confused. I think people are growing tired of stumbling in the dark. Could it be that our culture is ready to hear solid truth in love? Could it be that our culture is ready to hear about the light of Jesus?

#### **D. The Light of Life**

Jesus goes on, we will not walk in the confusion of the darkness, *"but we will have the light of life."* Jesus is saying that he is the one who can guide us to safety. He is the one who will push back the darkness in our lives. He is the one who will reveal what is hidden in our lives, not to shame us, but to heal us. He will reveal the path to life for us. He will reveal the truth of life for us. He will reveal life to us period!

With Jesus, we have the light of life. As Paul says in Ephesians, "You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord."

#### **IV. The Response (13-20)**

As you can imagine, the response by his hearers is not positive. Jesus says he is the light, claiming all those opposing him are in the darkness. And all those opposing him believe they are in the light while Jesus is in darkness. The Religious leaders essentially call him an egomaniac *again*, and question his origins *again*. The debate gets very heated very quickly. And, we'll pick up the debate in next week's sermon.

#### **V. The Implications**

For now, what are the implications of Jesus being the light in our lives? There are so many, but I want to give you four this morning.

##### **1. Jesus Reveals God to Us**

Jesus, the light, reveals God to us. If we choose to let Jesus light our way, we will never be in

the dark about God. We will never be in the dark about who God is or what he is like. As Darrell Johnson says, “Jesus, the light of the world, leads us out of the vagueness of God-talk so that we may know God as God really is” (Johnson, 72). Jesus is God with a face.

This doesn’t happen overnight of course. He’s too big to know immediately. But, step by step, day by day, month by month, year by year, Jesus reveals God to us as we walk with him through each day, and as we spend time in His Word.

In fact, in these middle chapters of John, these religious leaders are wrestling with this exact thing: who is God and what he is like? Last week’s text is a prime example. Jesus’ opponents forgot that God was a God of overwhelming mercy, showing compassion and mercy to thousands, forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin (Ex 34:6-7). That’s exactly how God revealed himself to Moses, but the leaders have forgotten. And Jesus, in forgiving the unnamed woman, reminds them what God is really like. He’s a God of grace first, otherwise, we’d all be in trouble. In chapter 14, Jesus will go on to say, “[Whoever has seen me has seen the Father](#)” (John 14:9). Paul will later say that Jesus is the visible expression of the invisible God (Col 1:15). Jesus is the perfect revelation of the living God. Stay in the light of Jesus, and we will never walk in the dark about who God is or what he is like.

## **2. Jesus Reveals Humanity to Us**

Jesus, the light, reveals true humanity to us. If we attach ourselves to Jesus, the light, we will never be in the dark about what it means to be human. Jesus is not only the perfect revelation of who God is, he’s also the perfect revelation of who we were created to be. He is the true human. And, our lifelong goal as Christians is to become more and more formed into his image. Scot McKnight calls this becoming “Christoformed.” We slowly and slowly become formed into the image of Christ, the true human. That is to say that we not only believe him, but we embody his teachings and way of life. Over time, his character, through the living water, the Holy Spirit, is reproduced in us. This of course also takes a lifetime, because nothing in the spiritual life happens in a hurry.

And, there are two character traits in particular that really stand out about Jesus, in this regard:

1. He loves and trusts his heavenly father completely. From the very beginning, he was about his father’s business because he loved him and trusted him. And, during his ministry, he was always finding time to get away to enjoy communion with his father. This must be important for being truly human.
2. And, he loves others, even his enemies. Even when he is dying on the cross, he forgives them. This must also be important for being truly human.

If we stay with Jesus in his light, he will reveal to us what it means to be truly human.

## **3. Jesus Reveals the Human Plight**

Jesus, the light, reveals the human plight to us. Jesus reveals what hurts us, but also what heals us. As they say, how well you define the problem will determine how well you solve the problem. Jesus reveals to us the real problem of what ails us, but also reveals the solution to

the problem.

We were driving on Stevens Creek back in January, and there was some sort of a demonstration happening with a very large sign. The sign said something like this: No more racism. No more sexism. No more militarism. No more ageism. No more classism. No more elitism. It had all the “isms” on this sign. And, I thought to myself – are these things the real problems with our society? The answer is no. In the light of Jesus, we realize that these are only symptoms of the real problem. The real problem goes much deeper and is much more dangerous, and Jesus described it more clearly than anyone had ever done. Jesus described a situation where we are in the grip of something in which we cannot free ourselves. That thing is sin, evil and death. We are in bondage to sin, evil runs right through our hearts, and we live in the fear of death.

And, we live in a world which refuses to believe it, which means their solution is faulty. They know death is a problem of course, but the topic is avoided at all costs. They never use the word sin. Sin is not in anyone’s vocabulary anymore. This is obvious because if you type “sin” into your iPhone, Siri auto-corrects it to sun. And, while evil is acknowledged, it is vaguely blamed on bad guys out there somewhere. And once we can get rid of them, then life will finally work. Evil doesn’t reside in my heart they say! And, because our world refuses to acknowledge the real problem, their solution is faulty. They place their hope in the products of the enlightenment, in the potential of humanity and the potential of technology. They believe that humanity, with the help of technology, will progress to some sort of utopia, defeating death in the process.

However, in the light of Jesus, we know the truth of the situation. We are in the grip of sin, evil and death. This *is* a great gift, to know the real problem, because then we can know the right solution.

What is the solution to sin, evil and death? He, himself, is the answer. Only he is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the entire world. Only he is the truth that sets us free from all that junk. Only he went through death and came out the other side alive, conquering sin, evil and death for all time. Yes. Easter is only two weeks away. Indeed, the light of Jesus shines into all that darkness of sin, evil and death, and the darkness has not and will not overcome Him (John 1:5).

#### **4. Jesus Reveals the Christian’s Role in Society**

And, #4, Jesus, the light, reveals the Christian’s role in the world. Not specifically in this text of course. But, what has always struck me with Jesus’ great claim to be the light of the world is that he uses the exact same words to describe his followers. In the Sermon on the Mount, he calls you and me “the light of the world” (Matt 5:14). The exact same wording. What incredible dignity he gives us! Christians are said to be ordinary people making extraordinary claims. But, you can turn that around to say, Christians are ordinary people about whom Jesus makes extraordinary claims. Jesus says follow me, and you will not walk in darkness, but you will glow with my light. Follow me and you will become a light. That’s a promise. No matter who you are, where you are or what you’re doing, this is your role in the world. As Os Guinness

says, “Everyone, everywhere, in everything.” And, does our world ever need us to glow right now – everyone, everywhere, in everything? More than ever, our world needs Christians to glow, especially in the face of the violence against Asians, especially in the face of the violence against blacks, especially in the face of violence against the other. No one is disposable, as we said last week! Everyone is made in the image of God!

We fulfill our role in society by following the light of the world into each day and glowing, participating with Him in shining light into the darkness. Paul told the Philippian Christians that in a world that is oppressively dark, go and “shine like stars” (Phil. 2:15).

Now we come back to Amanda Gorman’s poem. In her ending, remember she asked, “Are we brave enough to be the light?” And, so to borrow her words, “are we brave enough to be lights,” reflecting Jesus’ light, within the shade of this world? May he give us the courage!

## **VI. Silent Reflection**

To close our time, I’d like to finish with a silent reflection. Here are two questions to reflect on:

- Where do you need the light to shine today and this week? In your life? In a loved one’s life?
- Where do you need Jesus to help you be brave to reflect his light?

Amen.

## **VII. Benediction**

This week, may God shine the light of His glory into your hearts anew,  
And, may Christ, the light of the world, reveal his presence with you,  
And may the Spirit renew the image of God within you.  
Now, go and walk as children of light.

## **Resources**

Bruner, Dale, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*

Burge, Gary, *Jesus and the Jewish Feasts*

Johnson, Darrell, *Preaching the Gospel According to John* (Regent College Course)

Johnson, Darrell, *Who is Jesus?*

Klink, Edward, *John (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT)*

Reeves, Michael, *Delighting in the Trinity*