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I Am/We Are: A Series on Jesus' "I Am" Statements

II. Be the Light Switch

Matthew 5:14, 16 NRSV You are the light of the world.... [So] let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your father in heaven"

John 8:12 NRSV Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

Close your eyes and imagine with me that experience of going into a room in an unfamiliar house, or maybe a hotel room, or perhaps a public restroom. The room is dark and whether you are right-handed or left-handed, your hand immediately reaches to the right onto the wall at certain height, index finger poised to flip the light switch. Except sometimes it's not there. And there is that momentary instant of confusion, and then almost beyond your will your hand reaches out again to the same spot, as if in the intervening two seconds the light switch will have magically appeared where your muscle memory from a million other switches expected it to be. But it's still not there, is it? And now you have to search for it: is it higher on the wall, or on a different wall entirely, or, most annoyingly, on the outside of the door where you didn't even notice it because you weren't expecting to see it there? But then you finally do find it and flip that switch and all now becomes clear, you know the way to proceed, and you can confirm that you didn't confuse a closet for the bathroom, as you relax your puzzled brain that had gone on high alert when your muscle memory told you that something was out of place.

Many of the world's religions have a central place for the notion, the image, the metaphor of "light." Philosophers dating back to at least Plato 2500 years ago were fascinated by light and used it – as did Plato in his famous "Myth of the Cave" – to try to talk about what is most fundamental about life and reality. It is no different in our Christian tradition and the Jewish tradition from which we were birthed. The Book of Genesis begins the Bible with these words: *"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep... God said, let there be light, and there was light. And God saw that the light was good."* The Psalms describe God's word as a light for our paths. When the baby Jesus was presented in the temple, Simeon praised God saying, *"my eyes have seen your salvation... a light to reveal you to the nations....."* And, of course, John himself begins his gospel with those momentous words, *"In the beginning was the Word... [and] In him was life, and the life was the light of all people."* The image of light is found throughout Bible as a symbol of goodness and truth. And all of these images, and many more, would have resonated with Jesus' hearers when he proclaimed to them "I am the light of the world. Those who follow me will not walk in darkness, but have the light of life."¹

These are indeed beloved and powerful words, aren't they? This morning I want to briefly look a little more deeply at what this "I am" statement from Jesus – the second in our sermon series on those sayings – tells us about God and at the same time also warns us about some terrible ways of misinterpreting Jesus' words. To do so, we have

¹The preceding seven sentences adapted from <https://revpetert.wordpress.com/2014/03/13/sermon-i-am-the-light-of-the-world-john-812-2/>

to understand a little more about the context in which Jesus's words about himself were spoken. For Jesus' words didn't spring up in a vacuum; no, as with any Bible verse, to fully understand it we need to not simply pluck Bible verses out and treat them as if they are un-related to everything else. So what was going on, as John has it, when Jesus spoke these words? Well, one of the most important festivals for Jews at that time was called the Festival of the Tabernacles. It was a week-long celebration, where Jews from all over the land came to Jerusalem and camped out and went to the Temple to pray and sing and dance and give thanks. Families would make "booths" out of tree branches to live in that week. These very temporary structures were meant to recall for them the forty years that they had spent wandering in the wilderness after God had freed them from Egyptian slavery, years when they had no permanent homes but lived in tents and lean-to's made out of whatever they could find.

Every night of that Festival week families would go the Temple. Listen to how a preacher by the name of Michael Dean describes what happened there:

...during the Feast of Tabernacles there were four huge... candelabra set up in a part of the Temple. They were large enough that ladders had to be used to fill their bowls with oil and for them to be lit. Once they were lighted [those] who had been selected for their religious devotion would begin to dance ... all night long.... It is said the light that burst forth from the Temple that night could be seen from every house in Jerusalem.²

And these were HUGE candelabra indeed which could illuminate the whole Temple and

²<http://www.travis.org/sites/default/files/Sermon-Series/032209.pdf> See also <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/non-rcl-starters/john-812-20/>

its courtyards and could be seen for miles around. But what was the meaning of this candelabra and the singing and the dancing around it? Well, again let me defer to preacher Dean who says this:

[The giant candelabra were meant] to remind the Israelites of something else God did for them while they were living in tents traveling through the wilderness.... God guided them with a pillar of fire at night. [God's] light was their guide. It was this visible presence of God in the form of a cloud by day and fire by night that guided the children of Israel.³

In other words, the two key elements of the Festival of the Tabernacles – living outdoors in temporary structures and the immense candelabra that were lit and kept burning all night long – were meant to symbolize the work of God in **caring** for them, **freeing** them from what had enslaved them, and **showing** them the way to go **forward**.

So that is the background and context we need to keep in mind to truly understand Jesus' words about being the light of the world. For Jesus didn't say them in a vacuum or divorced from his context, but as one who – as I said last week – was a faithful Jew, himself attending that celebration in Jerusalem that honored God's care and freedom and providence. On the last day of the festival, then, the week's worth of worship and thanksgiving now done, Jesus spoke to those gathered there in the courtyard and said: "*I am the Light of the World; Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.*" Do you begin to see? Jesus' words here, in much the same way I noted last week, are not some sort of **rejection** of his heritage,

³Ibid.

not some sort of claim that now God has exchanged his love for the Jewish people for a new people, not exclusionary words but radically inclusionary ones! Throughout the Gospel of John, John believes that God and Jesus are fundamentally one and the same. *“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”* So when Jesus says that He is the Light of the World, and **says it in the context of a festival praising God’s work for freedom**, Jesus is thereby **identifying his** mission with what has always been God’s mission for the people He chose – to free them, to love them, to guide them in the ways that they should go. And now, in Christ, that freedom, that love, that guidance is to be made known to **ALL** people.

In other words, these words are never to be used to exclude or condemn. The light of God’s freedom, love, and guidance burns brightly in Jesus and it is because of Him that **we** can now know the God the Jewish people knew and know. Jesus is here widening the circle, NOT telling some people that they are excluded from that circle! Do you see that? Next week we will talk specifically about the claim by some that Jesus is the “only” way to know God’s freedom, love, and guidance, but for this morning what I want us to see is that Jesus is our Christ, our Savior, not because he somehow rejected the people whom he came forth from, but because he widened that circle of grace in which they lived by being the light of, indeed, the whole world.

Which also, therefore, tells us something about how we are to live and what we are to witness to. You see, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus’ words about “the light of the world” are rather different, aren’t they? Listen to them again: **“You are the light of the world.... [So] let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your father in heaven”** (Matthew 5:14, 16). To recur to our

opening image, there are lots of folks out there who are looking for the light switch. There are lots of folks who are fumbling amidst the shadows. Maybe, in fact, that is you. A preacher by the name of Heidi De Jonge says this: Too many folks

...do walk through the valleys of the shadows.... Some of you are walking in a darkness right now. The phone isn't ringing and you wish it would. You miss him so much and you wish you could hold his hand just one more time. The stress is more than you think you can bear.⁴

My friends, if her words describe you this morning, then know this: Jesus wants to console you, carry you, comfort you in the warmth of the light of God's care. Jesus wants you to know that there are many folks around you this and every day who want to bear that light to you, who do know where the light switch is located.

And if her words don't describe you on this day, you and I both know they describe someone you know. Someone whose fears have left them unable to move forward, someone who has believed, as Rev. Barbara Blaisdell puts it, the lies our culture tells us about what will make us happy, someone who too often has been deluded and scared by the voices around us that tell us that the stranger is to be feared and those who are "different" need to be shunned – folks who keep fumbling for the light switch but have yet to find it. And your glorious opportunity this and every day is indeed to **be** that switch, to help illumine those lives with the news and the knowledge of a God who loves them unconditionally.

Let me close with some wise words of challenge and hope from one writer who

⁴<http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/non-rcl-starters/john-812-20/>

asks each of us some challenging questions:

Is your light shining today, in your actions, in your words, in your attitudes? When the world looks at you, what does it see shining out? The love of God, the compassion of Jesus, the heart for the broken and the needy – or the selfishness and greed, the arrogance and self-importance, that stand opposed to the good news that is the gospel.⁵

And then the writer goes on to give you and me an assignment as a way to remember the glorious calling Christ has for us: From now on,

Every time you light a candle, or switch on a light, remember Jesus the light of the world, and remember his exhortation to us to let [y]our light shine, to let his light shine through [you].⁶

May it be so. Amen.

⁵revpetert.wordpress.com/2014/03/13/sermon-i-am-the-light-of-the-world-john-812-2/
Nowhere on this blog can I find the name of the author.

⁶Ibid.