

“I Am the Light of the World”
John 8:12, 9:1-41
Second Sunday of Lent
February 17, 2008

And God stepped out on space,
And he looked around and said:
I’m lonely—
I’ll make me a world.

And far as the eye of God could see
Darkness covered everything,
Blacker than a hundred midnights
Down in a cypress swamp.

The God smiled,
And the light broke,
And the darkness rolled up on one side,
And the light stood shining on the other,
And God said: That’s good!¹

James Weldon Johnson, who was one of our country’s great African-American preachers, reminded us with those words that light was the very first thing that God created. With it God separated the darkness of the world and began to bring order to the chaos that covered absolutely everything. But be careful here. Any good Sunday School student knows that, according to chapter one of Genesis, the Sun was not created until the fourth day. And unless you were completely asleep in Science Class, you know that the Sun, that mid-sized star roughly 93 million miles from our home planet, is this world’s main source of electromagnetic radiation, especially that small slice of visible light that illuminates our world. So what was this “light” that God so poetically created on the first day? What was this “light” that the Creator was able to fashion that forced the darkness to roll up on one side? Perhaps we need to look elsewhere. Listen to this:

The Word already was, way back before anything began to be.
The Word and God were together.
The Word was God.
God made everything by the Word.

¹ James Weldon Johnson, God’s Trombones, Penguin Books, New York, 1983, p 17 (Copyright by The Viking Press, 1927)

Nothing has been made without the Word.
Life was in the Word.
That life was Light for people.
The Light shone where it was dark
and the darkness did not stop the Light from shining.

In the Worldwide English Translation's rendering of the Prologue to the Gospel of John, we learn that the light of which John wrote comes from the Word, which in turn not only chases away the chaos of darkness, but illuminates the path that leads to life as well—that life that we breathe in with every breath as well as the life which John calls “abundant.” It is that light that the people who walk in darkness have plainly been able to see. And “if we walk in that light as he himself is in that light,” then we will not only have fellowship with one another, but fellowship with the One who is the source of that light as well, with the One who has been there from the very beginning. And try as it might, the darkness has not and will not be able to extinguish it.

Now let me pause for a moment and remind you that for the next several weeks of Lent we are going to be exploring the “I am” sayings of Jesus. The “I am” sayings are a very distinctive part of the Gospel of John. As you may have heard me say last week, one commentator has said that in these sayings “Jesus identifies himself with symbols that come from the common fund of ancient Near Eastern religious and human experience—for example, bread, life, light, truth. Through these common symbols, Jesus declares that people’s religious needs and human longings are met in him.”² I believe that through studying these familiar sayings we cannot only discover a fuller picture of Jesus, but a fuller picture of ourselves as well. They can help us to understand what we really need for that abundant, fully satisfying life for which every one of us longs. And by looking at these sayings during the season of Lent, by trying to understand what Jesus is telling us, by remembering that he said, “I am the bread of life, I am the door of the sheep, I am the good shepherd, and I am the resurrection and the life,” I believe that we can experience an Easter unlike any we have ever known. The saying we will look at today is chronologically the second of the “I am” sayings found in John. As a matter of fact, this

² Gail O’Day, The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. XI, The Gospel of John, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1995, p. 601

particular saying appears two times in this gospel. To those who had gathered around him in the temple on the last night of the Feast of Booths, and later to the man born blind that he met along the road, Jesus said, “I am the light of the world.” Let’s dig in and try to discover what he meant.

John begins by writing that Jesus had gone to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Booths. One of Israel’s three great annual festivals, the Feast of Booths—sometimes called the Festival of Tabernacles—started out as an agricultural observance, as a reminder of the time when people would go out to the fields and live in lean-tos during the harvest that God had so graciously provided. As time went by, it also became a time to remember the wanderings of the Israelites in the wilderness, and especially of that time when God gave the Law—that law the psalmist said “is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” That’s important to remember. For you see, by the time Jesus went to Jerusalem, the feast focused on that light more than anything else. The Jewish historian Josephus shows us how much it did by writing that every year four golden lamps were erected on the temple grounds and a large quantity of oil was poured into each one. As these lamps that towered over the outer walls of the temple were lit each night, spreading their light all over Jerusalem, they symbolically reminded the people of the light of God’s law. The priests would also come out carrying torches, joyfully dancing in the courtyard where the lamps stood. Now considering the fact that the walls of the temple at that time were covered in gold leaf, the light that was generated must have really been something. Its glow lit the entire city. And it is against that very bright background that Jesus turned to the crowd that surrounded them and said, “I am the light of the world.”

Interesting, isn’t it? In the midst of the darkness of night, as the people celebrated the gift that was meant to be a light to their path through life, Jesus said that he was more than just the light which illuminates Jerusalem and the surrounding area during the Feast of Booths. He said that he was the light of the world. He also said that if the people would follow him, they would never have to go through life in the dark. Did the people understand? Were they able to put two and two together and figure out what he meant? I doubt it. In John’s gospel, as in all the gospels, it is not until the followers of Jesus get to

the other side of Easter that they start to put the pieces together and begin to understand. But that didn't stop Jesus from trying to help them along the way. That is why in the very next chapter we find the story of the man born blind. Do you remember it?

John writes that as Jesus and the disciples were leaving the temple, perhaps that same night or sometime the next morning, they came across a man who had been blind since birth. Now you may remember that in those days people believed that sin and sickness were intimately related. So the disciples asked, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?" Jesus responded by telling them they were asking the wrong question. Life doesn't work that way. Jesus said that this man was born with darkened eyes so that both he and others might come to see the bright light of day. Then once again he said, "I am the light of the world." With that he spit in the dirt, made some mud, and rubbed it in the man's eyes. And when he went to wash his face as Jesus told him to do, he was no longer blind. The sun had risen in this man's life. The darkness was conquered and light abounded for the very first time. Of course the Pharisees, who had been given the task of being the keepers of God's law, took exception to all of this. Toeing the traditional party line, they discounted everything that had happened because Jesus healed the man on the Sabbath, thereby officially breaking the 4th commandment. As the story goes on and as they continued to discount the amazing thing that had taken place, those who were supposed to be the carriers of the light of day moved farther and farther into the darkness of night—the complete opposite of what had just happened to the man born blind.

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world." Taking those words and the stories that surround them into consideration, it seems to me that there are a couple of ways that I can go from here. I could take some time talking about the Old Testament use of the image of light, how it was used as a symbol for both God and the Law, and how Jesus built upon that symbolism to describe himself. If I went this way, surely I would have to include such verses as the psalmist's "The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom should I fear?" and Isaiah's "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." Or I could take some time talking about the different properties

of light such as reflection, refraction, and maybe even diffraction, and then relate them to the faith. If I did use those concepts, then in addition to the words of Jesus, I would definitely have to take into consideration those words from the Sermon on the Mount, “You are the light of the world.” You do know that as followers of Christ, we are called to reflect, refract, and even diffract his light, don’t you? I could also talk about the various effects that light has on life, how it is so vital for both plants and animals to survive. If I did so, surely a little lesson on photosynthesis or Seasonal Affective Disorder would be in order, although neither have nice little verses from which I can draw upon for support.

But as legitimate as all of those approaches might be, another route seems even better. Taking into consideration that the interplay between light and darkness is one of the major themes that we find in the gospel of John, and then remembering the Pharisees’ reaction to the man who was born blind, it would probably do us good to go back to the beginning, back to the very first chapter of John. Remember now, it was in those first 18 verses that John told us that the Word, who was with God and is God, was the light that shines so brightly in the darkness. He then told us how John the Baptist came to testify about the light that was soon to come into the world. And then after all of that, we read the following words:

*He was in the world,
And the world came into being through him;
yet the world did not know him.
He came to his own, and his own people did not accept him.
But to all who received him, who believed in his name,
he gave power to become children of God,
who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man,
but of God.*

There are a lot of reasons why I find that passage interesting. The most important, I think, is that it seems that John is reminding us that we have a choice in all of this. It seems that John is presenting this whole interplay between light and darkness as a decision that is set before each of us. I read a commentary earlier this week that said,

“The rejection of the Word by Jesus’ own people is restricted neither to the time of Jesus nor to that of the fourth gospel.”³ In other words, John’s not just talking about those awful Pharisees who refused to see the miracle that was literally staring them in the face. He’s talking about us as well. Every generation has those who choose to walk in the darkness. Have you ever chosen to walk in the darkness? If so, do you remember what happens? Every once in a while, my dog Fred will have to make a trip outside in the middle of the night. So I’ll get up and choose to walk through the garage without turning on the light—I don’t want to wake anyone up, after all. Well, you probably know how well that works. The cars, the toy chest, my tools—they are all in the garage. And I’ve got the cuts and bruises over the better part of my body to prove it! Walking in the darkness is not necessarily doing wrong, you see. It is not necessarily committing some great sin. Biblically speaking, walking in the darkness is simply making the choice to not use the light that God has so graciously provided to show us the way. Someone wrote that, “To walk in the darkness means to walk as if there is no God, for God is light. It is to be a practical atheist—not an actual one, of course. We believe there is a God, we know that God is there, but we live as though God does not exist. We do not expose ourselves to God. That is walking in darkness.”⁴

Now that’s interesting. Practical atheists know there is a God, but they choose to live their lives as if God does not exist. They know that the light is shining, but they choose to walk in the darkness. The light of the world is not forced on anyone, you see. God has sent the light into that place where men and women live, but they don’t have to use it to light their way. They have always had the freedom to choose. Oh, I suppose I could give a long list of ways men and women avoid choosing light. I guess I could point how out this choice or that decision tends to lead us into the dark. But in the end it all seems to boil down to nothing more than what we see happening with the Pharisees. They knew better than that. They had dedicated their entire lives to studying the light that God constantly shines into this world. They were so set on their own agenda, however; they were so focused on the way they thought that light was supposed to shine, and how that

³ Gail O’Day, *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IX*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1995, p. 525

⁴ From a sermon by J. David Hoke, www.horizonsnet.org

light was supposed to shine, and where that light was supposed to shine, and on whom that light was supposed to shine, that they failed to see that God was shining that magnificent life-giving light right before their very eyes. And with every step they took they walked farther and farther into the darkness.

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world."

It has been said that when Robert Louis Stevenson was a little boy, his mother found him staring out the window into the dark night. "What are you doing?" she asked him. "I'm watching the lamplighter," came the reply. "He's poking holes in the darkness." Christ has come to poke holes in your darkness. He has come to show you the way that leads to life. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" You have a choice, you see. You have the option to decide whether or not you will follow his light. Jesus has come to give us the opportunity to lead us through the black of night. Jesus has come to light our way us through that valley full of shadows. Jesus has come to poke holes in our darkness. Have you seen his light? Have you decided to follow it? How I pray you will.