

I am the Light of the World
John 8:12
Stadium Village Church
February 10, 2008

During the last few weeks we have been looking at how Abraham and Sarah became the father and mother of the people that would eventually be called Israel. We read about God making a covenant with Abraham and Sarah in which He promised to make a great people from their descendants. God promised that they would have a son, even when they were in human terms too old to have children. God kept His promise and gave them a son who they named Isaac. Isaac would have a son named Jacob; and Jacob would have twelve sons. These twelve sons, as well as Jacob, would move to Egypt because of a famine in the land. After living in Egypt for about 400 years the Israelite people had become numerous, but the Egyptians forced them to be slaves. God used a man named Moses to lead them out of Egypt and back to the Promised Land – what we know as Israel.

During their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, which took more than 40 years, God cared for them and guided them on the journey. In order to guide them as for what direction to go, when to stay in one place or another, and when to leave, God made His presence be seen as a supernatural cloud in the day and a pillar of fire at night. As they journeyed through the desert for the those 40 years, they could actually see God's presence in the cloud and the column of fire.

In order to remember this journey, God told the people of Israel to celebrate a Feast of Booths, or Feast of Tabernacles, or Sukkoth. During this feast, Israelites would build a shelter beside their homes in which they would live some of time. It was like camping out for a week in order to remember the time when their ancestors had to live in tents in the wilderness.

The Feast of Tabernacles or Sukkoth, was one of three celebrations in which people would travel to Jerusalem to celebrate the special feast – they would come to Jerusalem for celebrating the Passover, Pentecost (Shavuot), and Tabernacles (Sukkoth). At the time of Jesus, almost 2000 years ago, many people would come to Jerusalem for this feast. The temple at this time was a grand one. It is called the second temple – King Solomon built the original one about 1000 years before Jesus lived on earth. That one was destroyed but was rebuilt when the Israelites returned to Jerusalem about 400 years before the time of Jesus. Then the Romans helped build the second temple. The second temple copied the pattern of the first, but the Romans liked to build big temples like they had done to their false gods. But the temple had to be like the first which was very ornate but small. To make the whole thing large, the Romans built a large area around the small temple. The temple mount is what resulted from the Romans work. It took a tremendous amount of work to fill in a valley to make this large flat area on which the temple was located.

During the Feast of Tabernacles, the court area that was designated for women was lit by four large lamp stands that each had four large bowls. The lamp stands are thought to have been more than 20 meters tall or about 75 feet. Trained young priests would carry jars of oil up to the bowls. These bowl lamps were lit each evening during this festival. Each night people would be singing and dancing through out the night – some even trying to not sleep any night of the

festival. So if you can imagine four tall towers each with four large oil lamps that lit up this courtyard filled with people dancing, singing, and praising God. The bright lamps remind people of how the pillar of fire that indicated that God was present and was guiding them on their journey.

Then, maybe on the main day of the festival, Jesus stands up in this crowd and says, I am the Light of the world. Try to imagine the impact of that statement in that setting. This statement was not hard to understand – Jesus was claiming to be one with the source of the pillar of fire that led their ancestors in the wilderness and now they were commemorating with the large lamps above the courtyard.

Jesus stood in this area and said: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” Here are the many Jewish worshippers, and temple authorities doing crowd control, and then Jesus stands there and shouts that HE is the light of the world. They are thinking about the miracle of God leading their ancestors in the wilderness centuries before and now this man is saying HE is the light of the world. Not surprisingly, Jesus was immediately challenged by the rulers who questioned how He could make such a claim.

We would do well to consider the statement as well and ask some questions, not to challenge what Jesus said, but to understand what it really means and why it is significant. I believe this verse calls us to ask at least three questions: first, what does it tell us about Jesus? Second, what does it mean for us that Jesus is the light of the world? And third, what does the fact that Jesus is the light of the world call us to do?

First, what does this statement tell us about Jesus? When Jesus said “I am the light of the world,” especially in the setting of the temple, He was NOT saying that I have some really good ideas that will help you live. He was not saying that He saw the light and now can tell us about it.

Rather, because of where and when He made this statement, Jesus was making a claim that He is the same as the Source of the light that led the Israelites through the wilderness hundreds of years earlier. Like the column of fire in the wilderness was God’s presence for the Israelites many years earlier, Jesus is now the light of the world and is God’s presence for both Israel and the whole world.

But why use the symbol of light to describe God? God is often described as light in the Bible, both in the Old Testament and the New. In fact the Bible only says a few things that God is, and one of those is light. In first John we read that God is light. God is not just light – He is also called love and spirit and good. But why does the Bible use light to describe God? Sometimes we get so accustomed to using a term that we forget why it is used or what it means.

We should first consider that describing God as light fits with how people came in contact with God. The people of Israel saw light in the column of fire. They also saw light coming from the Tabernacle and the temple when God allowed His presence to be known – what is called the shekinah glory.

Saying that God is light helps us to understand that He not being material – He is not a thing like the rest of creation. God is not a statue, He is not some body in the heavens. He is light – not some object that emits light.

Interestingly, on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles the priests would face to the east and say: "Our fathers, in this place, turned their backs upon the

Temple and turned their faces toward the east and worshiped the sun (and other gods), but we (turning west toward the Holy of Holies) turn our faces toward God."

Describing God as light also tells us something about God's character. It is not hard to see the contrast between darkness and light. Light helps reveal things so that we know what is there. Things can hide in darkness – evil usually does not want to be seen – but it can hide in the darkness. We often regard light as being good, darkness as being bad. Describing God as light helps us understand His moral purity – there is no wrong in God.

Light is also used to symbolize truth. When we see the light – we mean we realize the truth about something. When the truth about God's love is revealed to people, we often call this light. When there is light we can see what is true.

When Jesus said that He was the light of the world, He was making claim to all the reasons why God is described as light.

Application – When we praise God we often do so by describing Him in accurate terms. For example we describe Him as holy, just, the One who created all things, loving, kind, full of mercy, and other terms that describe the character of God that we see in the Bible and in our experience with Him. But the Bible also describes God with metaphors, like a Rock, Light, a sun and shield, a Good Shepherd, a Husband, and a Warrior. I would suggest that we should make use of these metaphors as well. Tell God that He is like a Good Shepherd and consider while the psalmist used that picture to describe God. In fact, I think that we can even think of a modern metaphor that might describe some aspect of God that we appreciate. Maybe we would use terms like perfect teacher, or an ideal boss or a physician. No metaphor will be adequate but they may be useful in giving praise to God for who He is. In your worship of God, use some terms, both from the Bible and things that you see in Your world to express your praise of Him.

A second question to consider is what does it mean for us that Jesus is the Light of the world? After Jesus told the crowd that He is the light of the world, He went on to say two more things: first, that anyone who follows Him will never walk in darkness; and second, but will have the light of life. What was Jesus telling the people would happen if they followed Him?

When the people of Israel were traveling through the desert they followed the light – the pillar of fire. Eventually that pillar of fire led them from slavery in Egypt to freedom in a Promised Land. They were no longer slaves but now were free people living in a new land with God as their King. Just like the people of Israel that were led from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land, people who follow Jesus are led from spiritual darkness to spiritual light.

Have you ever been caught in a dark room – maybe the electricity went out or somebody accidentally turned off the lights? You have this feeling of not knowing which way to go. You may grope around trying to not trip over furniture, trying to find a source of light. But maybe as your eyes adjust to the darkness, you can see a tiny source of light, maybe underneath the door. Or maybe emergency lights come on. All of a sudden you have a sense of direction and you start making it to the door.

Likewise with following Jesus, the Light of the world. Without Him we are wandering around not knowing what to do, not knowing what is the meaning of your life, and not having hope after you die. But once you turn to follow Jesus, it

is like seeing a ray of light – you can turn to the light and find direction for life and hope for eternal life even after you die. Jesus said a follower of Him would have the light of life – the same term that John used earlier in the book to describe Jesus Himself. Being with Jesus will be our eternal reward.

Application – If you have never decided to follow the Light of the World, this is your chance. Once you turn to follow Jesus, you will have direction for this life and hope for eternity. If you have become a follower of the Light of the world, keep focused on Him. Seeking Him daily in reading His word and in prayer will keep our eyes focused on that Light.

What does this call us to do? Going back to the illustration of being in a dark room and walking to the light – what if the room was a large room with many people in it. You saw this light and started walking toward it – wouldn't you soon start telling the others to come as well. In fact, as you got nearer to the light source, you might even be lit up as well as the light shines on you.

Interestingly, in a very different setting, Jesus called His followers the light of the world. Once we come to know and follow Jesus, experience the true light of the world, we become bearers of that light. When we walk around this world as followers of Jesus, we should be like lights in the darkness. We should with compassion be calling people to come to the Light of the world. How are we doing at bearing that Light?

At times I wonder why we are not more effective. If we are in that dark room and we have found the light, why shouldn't people rush to follow the light as well? When we gather for prayer for this church, we often pray that this church be a lighthouse for the UM, the neighborhood, other campuses around the Twin Cities. Why don't more people see the light in us?

The reasons are many, but one I want to leave you with one. As I was thinking about this sermon, a song came to my mind – some of you may know it. It is called "Bearers of the Light" by Michael Card. I remembered the song but never really paid attention to all the words – I just remembered the phrase "the burden of bearing the light." Well I easily found it in our less than organized collection of CDs and I played it several times. I realized that the main message of the song is that we need to be mentored in bearing the light. The song talks about Barnabas who helped Paul who helped Timothy in learning to bear the light. The last verse says – "the great need of us all, a true mentor, a Paul, who has traveled the road that is before us... Listen to this song as we prepare our hearts for Communion.

Before we do that, I would like to remind you that we have many good examples, Pauls if you wish, of bearing the light. I also believe that the nation of Korea is a good example as a people who are bearing the light. Let me remind you of a few things about Korea. Korea has about 13,000 long-term missionaries serving in countries around the world. One-fourth of their missionaries are in Muslim cultures. They are sending out more than 1000 new missionaries each year. Their goal is to have 1 of every 300 Christians to be a missionary. The Korean church is characterized by prayer, by sending missionaries into new places, and by training other nations to develop their mission efforts. Korea is an excellent example of bearing the light and mentoring others.

Listen now to "Bearer of the Light."