

“LIGHT FOR LIFE”

Sermon by Richard Ollinger at St. John’s Presbyterian Church, Devon, PA
Sunday, February 24, 2013

Scripture Readings: Exodus 13:17-22

John 1:1-5; 8:12-20

Throughout history a number of individuals have made bold and even boastful statements about themselves. Julius Caesar declared, *“I came, I saw, I conquered!”* King Louis XIV, declaring his absolute power as ruler of France said, *“I am the state!”* And, of course, there was Mohammed Ali who boasted about himself, saying, *“I am the greatest!”* None of these claims or others like them has stood the test of time or had the impact on the world like the affirmations Jesus Christ made about himself. As we read in the New Testament Gospel of John, Jesus said,

“I am the Fountain of Living Water!”

“I am the Bread of Life!”

“I am the Light of the World!”

“I am the Good Shepherd!”

“I am the True Vine!”

“I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life!”

“I am the Resurrection and the Life!”

Upon first hearing these statements, we might think that only a person with a very large ego would make the kind of claims he made about himself. But, when we get to know the person who said these things – *when we get to know Jesus* – what we discover is not an insecure and intimidating power-hungry despot, but rather a humble, compassionate, suffering servant of God who spoke these words *for* God as a way to convey God’s love and to give life and hope to all who believe him.

You will be glad to know that I am not going to preach this morning on each one of these seven “I Am” statements of Jesus. If each statement is a 20 minute sermon, we would still be here at Noon, or actually I would probably be the only one still here at Noon! I will warn you that I might not be as prompt as Nicole to have the service end at the 10:30 hour. She amazes me how each week, no matter what is included in the service, she gets us out of here in an hour, and yet nothing feels rushed. Just so you know, my wife, Nancy, told me to be sure to tell you I’m not as good in managing to get congregations out of worship in an hour. I’ll try today, though.

According to the Bible, the Feast of Tabernacles was one of three annual Jewish festivals that every Jewish man was required to attend. The feast was a seven-day commemoration of the forty years Israel wandered in the wilderness before God finally brought them to the Promised Land. Two things made the Feast of Tabernacles unique. First, it was expected that for the

entire seven-day period families would camp outdoors in temporary shelters made of branches and leaves as a reminder of the hardships their ancestors endured during the wilderness years. The other thing that made the Feast of Tabernacles unique were these enormous candelabra that were erected at the Temple court in Jerusalem – supposedly 75 feet tall – with huge bowls at the top filled with gallons of oil that would burn for the entire 7-day period. The light from the candelabra burned day and night as a symbolic reminder that when the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness for those 40 years, they believed God was present with them and protecting them and leading them at all times. As we heard Melody read this morning from the Old Testament Book of Exodus, “*By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light.*” At the end of the seven-day Feast of Tabernacles, when the oil in the candelabra had burned down, the bright lights that had lit up the city of Jerusalem died and darkness returned. It is believed that it was probably in that setting that Jesus made his declaration, “*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.*”

I don't think we can even begin to fully appreciate how startling those words would have been to the most faithful of Jewish believers. With those words Jesus sent shock waves through the Jewish religious establishment. He took what was a common metaphor about God and applied it to himself. There was only one light of the world and that was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who never was seen but often heard. There was only one light of the world and that was the God who revealed himself to Moses in a burning bush and whose power was witnessed by the parting of the Red Sea, and whose voice called out to Moses on the mountain where the Ten Commandments were given. It was this God who accompanied the Israelites in the wilderness as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night; this God was the light of the world. Now, Jesus is saying he is the light of the world, claiming for himself all the power and goodness associated with God.

This morning, let's reflect upon this bold and incredible statement Jesus made about himself. What did he mean when he declared, “*I am the light of the world,*” and what significance, if any, do these words have for us today? One thing I believe Jesus meant is this:

HE IS THE LIGHT THAT REVEALS GOD'S PRESENCE WITH US!

When we want to see something or someone better, we turn on a light. In Jesus Christ, God turned on a light that revealed his presence in the world and his love for the world.

Perhaps you have heard the story of the little boy who came running into the house from playing outside, jumped onto his chair at the dinner table and grabbed his fork ready to eat. “*Whoa, wait a minute!*” his mother said, “*You have germs on your hands. Go wash before you eat.*” The boy scrambled to the sink, quickly washed his hands, came running back to the table, jumped onto his chair, grabbed his fork, and before he could get the first bite into his mouth was

stopped again by his mother who said, “*Hold on there, buddy! We have to thank God before we begin to eat.*” The boy put down his fork, folded his hands, shook his head, and muttered under his breath, “*Germ and God! Germ and God! That’s all I ever hear around this place and I ain’t never seen neither one of them!*”

No one has ever seen God, but we know what God looks like and acts like because Jesus Christ has come. He is the light that reveals God’s presence and God’s identity. In one of his writings, William Barclay said, “*In Jesus we see the love, the compassion, the mercy, the seeking heart, the purity of God as nowhere else in all the world. With the coming of Jesus the time of guessing is gone, and the time of certainty is come. Jesus came to tell us the truth about God and the truth about ourselves.*”

On the cover of this morning’s bulletin is a haunting paragraph from a sermon by author and theologian, Frederick Buechner, in which he says, correctly I believe, “*we live in a world that knows much about darkness.*” We do. Although most of us, if not all of us, far prefer light, darkness hovers all around us, and also dwells deep inside us.

We all have known dark times in life. If anyone here says they haven’t, just wait, you will. Dark times are those times *or periods of time* when we’re feeling lonely, or afraid, or lost, or sad, or sorry. Dark times are those times when we anxiously wait for the doctor’s diagnosis of medical tests we have undergone. Dark times are those times when we realize we made a wrong decision and we have to carry the weight of that decision around with us forever. Dark times are those times when someone we love leaves us, or lies to us, or cheats on us, or dies on us. Dark times are those times when, despite how bright the day might be outside, we have that awful “pit” *inside* our stomach that just won’t go away, and God seems very far away. Believe me, I know that what I am about to say is far easier said than done, but oh, it is so important that in those darkest times of our lives, when we feel completely lost and all alone, that we remember and trust God’s presence with us.

There is a story about a young woman who was a hostage in her own home. She was married to a man who was physically, verbally, and mentally abusive to her. She was living in darkness day in and day out. The details are too sad to share, but one thing he would sometimes do was lock her in a dark closet for an extended period of time. What he did not know, that she later shared, was those hours she spent alone in the closet were the safest hours she knew and they were the hours that actually gave her the strength to endure until the day came that she finally left him. You see, while in the darkness of the closet, she said she would pray and recite over and over again the promise of Jesus from the Gospel of John, “*I am the light of the world. Those who believe in me will never be in darkness, but will have the light of life with them forever.*”

No matter how dense the darkness, no matter how troubled the soul, no matter the depth of our sorrow or pain, Jesus Christ promises that we are never alone. He is God with us. He is our light and our salvation; with him we will never be in darkness.

Here's a second thing I believe Jesus meant when he said, "*I am the light of the world,*"

HE IS THE LIGHT THAT REVEALS OUR TRUE SELVES!

Light, by its very nature, has a way of illuminating some things we would rather not see. Bright sunlight beaming through our windows has a way of showing off the dirt in our homes. When we look at ourselves in a brightly lit mirror, we see things we hope other people don't see when they look at us! *Light exposes our true selves!* So does the light cast by Jesus Christ. In his light, we come face to face with our true selves – the best in us as well as the worst in us.

You see, just as we all have dark times in life, so too do we all have a dark side to ourselves that most of us manage to keep pretty well hidden. We're human! Thoughts and feelings of pride, envy, lust, hate, prejudice, hostility, lie inside each of us. I know we don't like to hear this and we certainly don't like to talk about it, but it's true. And, because it's true, in any given day there are foolish words we sometimes speak, there are shameful thoughts we sometimes have, and there are foolish acts we sometimes commit that if we have any conscience at all weigh heavy on our hearts and minds. The best of us and all the rest of us have a dark side.

And God knows this! And Jesus Christ exposes this! We can hide our inner selves from others, but we cannot hide our inner selves from God. This is one reason why, I think, some people choose to stay as far away from God as they possibly can; which is too bad because more than God's harsh judgment of us what Jesus reveals is God's love for us, God's mercy towards us, and God's hope for us. God knows our sins, but loves us still, and in Jesus Christ offers not only forgiveness, but even more importantly a new way to live and a higher, more honorable path to follow. Understand, however, that this path of walking in God's grace means we cannot be the same person we were; changes need to occur; the old self must die and a new self be born; which, of course, is far easier said than done.

A woman came home from shopping one day with one of those wooden plaques that many of us have hanging on our walls at home and at work. This plaque said, "*Prayer Changes Things!*" She hung it in the family room where she and her husband spent the majority of their time. One evening, though, she noticed that the plaque was missing and something else was in its spot. "*What happened to that wooden plaque?*" she asked her husband. "*I took it down,*" he replied. "*Why?*" she asked; "*Don't you believe in prayer?*" "*Of course I believe in prayer,*" he said; "*I just can't stand change!*" Many people can't stand change, which makes living in God's grace and walking with Jesus Christ on a higher, more honorable path in life very difficult. Yet, by

courageously confronting those things about ourselves that need to be changed we more fully grow into the person God created us to be.

By now most of us have probably either seen the movie or the play, *Les Miserables*. Jean Valjean, the main character, becomes a man touched and changed by God's grace. After spending 19 years in prison for stealing bread he is finally paroled but unable to find work, whereupon he breaks his parole, flees town, and becomes a sought-after fugitive. Sadly, he resumes his stealing ways while being graciously hosted by a Catholic priest. He steals two silver candlesticks from the parish where he is staying and once again flees, but he doesn't get very far away before he is caught and brought back to the priest. In a beautiful example of God's forgiveness and grace the priest tells the police that Valjean did not *take* the candlesticks, rather they were *given* to him as a gift. In that moment Jean Valjean is touched by God's grace and in accepting it he becomes a new and different person; his old self dies and he becomes someone new, almost unrecognizable. He spends the rest of his life giving to others the same forgiveness and grace he received.

We all are thieves and scoundrels in our own ways. In the bright light of Jesus Christ our true selves are exposed. But more importantly, in the bright light of Jesus Christ God's grace is illuminated and God's hope for us is revealed; which brings me to this final thought about what I believe Jesus meant when he said, "*I am the light of the world.*"

HE IS THE LIGHT THAT LEADS TO ABUNDANT AND ETERNAL LIFE!

Jesus came to tell *and show* the world that God's great desire for all people everywhere is to know and experience abundant and eternal life. An abundant life does not necessarily mean a wealthy life, nor does it mean a life free from difficulty, sadness, or pain. There are diseases, heartaches, challenges, and failures that we all have to face. There are dark nights of the soul that we all have to endure and dark sides to ourselves that we all have to confront. But, here is the good news my friends, good news that God in Christ wants us to know and firmly believe: **No matter how alone or afraid or sad or guilty we might be, there is Someone we call God who knows us and accepts us, and promises to be with us, to watch over us, to strengthen us, to forgive us, and to be a light to guide us through whatever darkness is around us or inside us.** How do we know this? The Bible tells us so. In Scripture we are told that God is our light and our salvation. In him there is no darkness. There is nothing, absolutely nothing, we need to fear, not even *death* itself! Knowing this and living in this promise leads to God's gift of abundant and eternal life.

Our hearts are still heavy from the terrible tragedy that occurred on December 14 at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, where 20 children and 6 staff members were shot and killed in a mass murder. We cannot even begin to fathom the sorrow so many families continue to have and will always have for the rest of their lives. Any of us who have lost

children know there is no pain greater in all the world than losing a son or daughter, particularly as innocent as were the children in that elementary school. There are no words that can be spoken that can ever take away the pain created that day. All we can do is pray and stand with those families, and others like them, holding firmly to our faith in God and in God's promise of eternal life. Such is the faith of the person who wrote this poem – a poem that in some ways is shallow – but fully affirms what Christ our Lord has promised to all who believe in him:

It was 11 days before Christmas around 9:38,
when 20 beautiful children stormed through heaven's gate.
Their smiles were contagious, their laughter filled the air.
They could hardly believe all the beauty they saw there.
They were filled with such joy, they didn't know what to say.
They remembered nothing of what had happened earlier that day.
"Where are we?" asked a little girl, as quiet as a mouse.
"This is heaven," declared a small boy; "We're spending Christmas in God's house."
When what to their wondering eyes did appear,
but Jesus, their Savior, so the children gathered near.
He looked at them and smiled, and they smiled just the same.
Then he opened his arms and he called them by name.
And in that moment was joy, that only heaven can bring;
those children all flew into the arms of their King.
And as they lingered in the warmth of his embrace,
one small girl turned and looked at Jesus' face.
And as if he could read all the questions she had,
he gently whispered, to her, "I'll take good care of your mom and your dad."
Then he looked down on earth, the world far below;
he saw all of the hurt, the sorrow, and woe;
then he closed his eyes and he outstretched his hand,
"Let my power and presence re-enter this land!
"May this country be delivered from the hands of fools."
I'm taking back my nation. I'm taking back my schools!
Then he and the children stood up without a sound,
"Come now my children, let me show you around."
Excitement filled the space, some skipped and some ran;
all displaying enthusiasm that only a small child can.
And I hear him proclaim as he walked out of sight,
"In the midst of this darkness, I AM STILL THE LIGHT."

"I am the light of the world," Jesus said. *"Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."* Forever! Amen.