

*The following reflections are written by St. John's and Covenant Presbyterian youth who attended the 2025 Montreat Youth Conference themed "Light My Path." Each day at Montreat our youth listened to Keynotes by Rev. Chris Lee and Sermons by Rev. Jenny McDevitt. What they learned about God is shared below.*

**Day One: Walk in the Dark (Genesis 1:1-5)**  
**by Ellie Baughman**

On Day 1 of Montreat, our theme was Walking in the Darkness. We learned about the importance of the darkness and why God created it. Our morning keynote focused on the idea that darkness is not all bad, and in fact it is where some of our greatest growth happens. We often think of darkness as the absence of hope or separation from God, when *really* it is a time of rest, contemplation and protection. We learned about the psychological concept of Colorism, which is the discrimination of someone within a particular group, and how it was different from Racism, which is the discrimination of an outside group. We watched a video of the Doll Test, where young girls viewed dolls with lighter skin tones as 'good and pretty,' and darker skinned dolls as 'bad and ugly.' Children as young as five years old had already formed these views of skin tone, even with dolls, and this led to a deeper discussion in our small groups. We discovered how harmful it can be to think of the "darkness" as a "bad" thing.

In worship that night, Pastor Jenny, our preacher, told a story of how she used to be scared of the dark, and especially the monsters under her bed that came out at night when the darkness came. But as she grew older she discovered that the darkness is not something to fear or run from—it has its purpose. She invited us to think about darkness as a part of God's creation. God gave it a name just like God gave light a name. It is up to us to understand it and respect it. God never said darkness was a bad thing, in fact he said that it is equally important to light, and Jesus tells us not to let our hearts be troubled or afraid. In the midst of life, when we need a break, darkness can be our friend.

**Day Two: See in the Dark (Acts 9:1-19)**  
**by Kylie Simmington & Ellie Fisher**

On Tuesday in Keynote we read this passage from Acts. God tells Ananias to help Paul, who was known for persecuting Christians. This is a risky task for Ananias, who was a Christian. Paul saw God on the road to Damascus and is blinded by this encounter. God tells him to stop persecuting Christians and to become his instrument to share the gospel.

Both Ananias and Paul could have said no to God in each of these instances, but they didn't. God isn't in the business of forcing us to do things—he gave us free will. This is hard because we have many choices in life and many different paths to take. Anyone that says that God's path is always clear and straightforward is kidding themselves.

The path to follow God through life is like a highway junction with many exits. The key to seeing what's ahead in the dark is focusing on Jesus, our guide. Sometimes our path won't go the way we think it is supposed to go. You could do everything right and you encounter suffering, and you could do everything wrong and it all works out. God is God and is there through our whole lives.

Pastor Chris shared about his windy path through college because of his choices. He was accepted and got a basketball scholarship to go to his dream school Howard University. His freshman year he lost his scholarship because he didn't go to class. He had to transfer to Johnson C Smith in Charlotte where he almost flunked out again because he thought this school was beneath him.

A family friend who was a dean at the college pulled him aside and told him, "You are about to blow this because you won't let go of what was. Accept your reality and walk where you are." After that, Chris began to come to terms with the path he was on. It ended up being exactly where he was supposed to be. He met his wife and his best friend there. Charlotte was the path for him--it was where he became a Christian and felt a call to ministry.

Pastor Chris told us that when life doesn't make sense, Jesus demonstrates that pain and belief can co-exist. More often than not, life *doesn't* make sense. Through it all, fix your heart on Christ. There will be times when the direction is not clear. Focus on God, look inward, and adjust your vision to be aware of God's presence all around you with each and every step you take.

Later that night in worship, Pastor Jenny began her sermon by telling stories which reminded us that our light comes from within. It was only in the dark that Nicodemus felt safe enough to share his true self to Jesus and express his doubts. In some Christian traditions, this passage can be interpreted in harmful ways. Jenny taught us about the rule of love of the PCUSA that reminds us that scripture is meant to guide our life and point to God's love, not to help us judge one another or ourselves.

We affirm that Jesus Christ is the author of salvation. The power of God's salvation isn't dependent on our ability to believe. We cannot control who has access to salvation. Jesus wants Nicodemus, and us, to know that he doesn't expect us to be certain about everything. We are allowed to have questions-- doubt keeps faith alive.

Nicodemus shows us that questions often bloom in the darkness, allowing for resurrection. When we are surrounded by darkness, we can use that time to imagine with hope a world that is not here yet. Nicodemus was eventually able to proudly share his faith in the light, and it wouldn't have been possible without talking to Jesus in the darkness, relating back to the Day 2 theme of "seeing in the darkness."

### **Day Three: You Are Here (Ruth 1:11-19)** **By Graham & Caroline Hillier**

The theme for Wednesday was the question "where are you?" At keynote, Pastor Chris asked us the question "Where are you?" to which many people responded "Montreat." He asked us to look deeper mentally and emotionally rather than physically. When we thought of it that way, some of us were at the mountaintop, feeling alive, close to God, and happy. Others were in the darkest valley feeling far from God. However, most were in the wilderness.

Wilderness is anytime between the mountain tops and the darkest valley. In the wilderness, the light and darkness work together. In scripture, wilderness is described both positively and negatively. For example, it is associated with temptation but also transformation. Chris suggested that through the light, darkness, and wilderness, we sing and praise the Lord. He said no matter where you are, **don't stop singing**.

In worship we discussed the same question of where we were. Jenny mentioned that no matter where you are, God is with you always. You are never overlooked or abandoned by God. God knows the enormity of the entire world but is still close enough to hear your heartbeat. He will never leave you in the valleys or forget about you in the wilderness. He is with us through all the choices we make and the paths he lights.

In the scripture, Ruth shows us that we have to make choices. Doing the next right thing is anything God can ask of us.

Ruth knows we don't have to live life alone. Pastor Jenny mentioned the importance of finding your people, like the church, that will be with you in the wilderness as well as the mountaintops and valleys. She said that in order to have peace, we need to stop pretending we can do things on our own. At the end of the scripture, Ruth clings to Naomi. The last time an action like this occurred in the Bible was in Genesis when God created Adam and Eve, deciding that humans should not be alone.

Jenny closed worship by saying that no matter where you are, take the next step and trust that it is enough for God to work with.

#### **Day Four: See in the Light (Mark 9:2-10)** **By Teagan Bullock & Ryan Marshall**

Our keynote time on Day four began with a Christian music video called "Welcome to America". The video showed America through the lens of the "least of these" - the immigrant, the homeless, the incarcerated, the poor. We saw an America filled with challenges like injustice, addiction, homelessness, hate and division. Chris asked us "What is the church doing about it? And even more, what are **we** doing about it?" The Church is called to be a light in the world, reflecting God's love and justice. We aren't the light ourselves, but we're meant to shine by how we treat others, speak truth, and live with compassion. Our passage about the transfiguration showed us that even in everyday or difficult times, God's light can break through. We were encouraged to look for that light, and to be that light in small, everyday ways—to serve others, and be kind, honest, and loving. You don't have to be perfect or powerful to make a difference. Even a small act of love can reflect something much greater because God's light never goes out.

Later that day in worship we looked deeper into the transfiguration passage in Mark. During the transfiguration Peter's immediate reaction is to want to stay in the dazzling light, to stay at the mountaintop. That is a normal reaction, but we must remember that whether we are in the shadow of the valley or on the mountaintop, God's light is there—some days God's light blinds us and some days God's light is only given to us in glimpses. When God's light breaks through our darkest days, we can remember for a moment that we don't need to be afraid because God is the source of light, not us.

The transfiguration shows us that we can see the light wherever we look for it. In the mundane and heartbreaking moments, light breaks through. God is always doing something new and God's love is always present with us.

Pastor Jenny compared God's love to glitter—one of her favorite things—she said that “(like glitter) You can try as hard as possible, but you cannot get rid of it. God's love is here, it is not going away”. Even when it feels like God is not there, you can look for the light, and remember that God loves you just the way you are, no exceptions. At the end of worship, we put oil and glitter crosses on our hands and foreheads reminding ourselves of God's love—like glitter it will never, ever leave us.

**Day Five: Work in the Light (Matthew 5:14-17)**  
**By Ryan Crill & Rowan Bellew**

Throughout the week, we explored what darkness looked like and the wilderness we travel through between our highest and lowest points. Our last day was about what we do when we are at the peak, and the journey to get there.

In keynote time, we read from psalm 120, a song of ascent—it reminded Israel and us that the God is our keeper, and will not slumber nor sleep. God will keep our going out and coming in from this time and forever more—

Jews prayed and sang this Psalm while traveling the dangerous road to Jerusalem to remind them that God guides them and keeps them safe. Pastor Chris reminded us that as we return home, God keeps us as we go, too.

We watched clips from a documentary about Alex Hannold and his free solo rock climbing ascent up “El Captain” a massive rock face in Yosemite National Park. Alex climbed *his* own route up the mountain, not up any of the pre-established routes. He took the climb one step at a time, thinking about and trying different solutions as he went to create his own route.

Chris reminded us that God has guided us this far, and God will guide us in the future as we take the path that He lights ahead of us. This path will look different for each of us, it is not set in stone and it is ever changing. Our job is to take heart, have courage and to take it step by step, inch by inch.

Later that night in worship, we read from the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus tells us that WE are the light of the world. Those of us who follow have a duty to reflect that light to every corner of the world. Our preacher Jenny loves Christmas lights. So does her whole family but especially her younger brother. Every year he would beg for more and more Christmas lights and decorations of all kinds, inflatables and light up woodland creatures and everything in between. When he was around six he was over at a friend's house, and when it came time for him to go home, the parents of his friend didn't know where he lived. He was asked if he knew how to get home. Nope. What street he lived on. Nope. If he knew where the bus dropped him off. Nope.

But then he said he knew what the house next door's Christmas decorations looked like. And the one next to that, and the whole neighborhood. He made it home by following the lights he recognized along the way.

He had paid attention to every bright and shining detail of every yard. So much so that when it mattered most, he could tell others all about it. He also got home that night because enough houses had lights for him to tell about. It really makes you think about how one little light can make a huge impact on lighting someone's way. We are the light of the world that guides people to God.

One of Jenny's seminary professors told the class one day that the United States would benefit greatly from a southern translation of the Bible. This is because unlike Hebrew and Greek, there is a lack of differentiation between you (singular) and you (plural) in the English language. Matthew 5:14-17 says "You are the light of the world" but that 'you' should have been Y'ALL. This is great news because it means that being the light of the world doesn't rest on our solitary shoulders. It turns out that being the light of the world is a lot like a group project.

If we are going to talk seriously about being the light of the world together, we need to realize that it isn't just to an exclusive group, but for everyone. We are called to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God. We don't get to shirk this responsibility, we are called to be the light of the world by loving our neighbor. We have to believe that our responsibility is to love everyone. And that is the biggest most important group project we will ever be a part of. Every single one of us is needed. When we work together our light shines through the darkness, so much so that the darkness doesn't stand a chance.