

"I AM the Light of the World"

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In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ...

^{8:12}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." (John 1:1-9; 8:12)

As we start this Lenten sermon series on the "I Am" Statements of Jesus, we need to start at the beginning... or at least near the beginning. In Exodus chapter 3, when God first calls to Moses from that very strange and wondrous bush that burned brightly with a heavenly light, but was somehow not consumed by the flames, God gives Moses a daunting commission. He would lead God's people out of slavery in Egypt, and guide them to a new home, "a land flowing with milk and honey."¹ Moses is reluctant and resistant. He has so many questions. And he finally arrives at a big one. "Who is this? Who are you?" Essentially, Moses wanted a name. If he was going to go in front of Pharaoh, and all the people of Israel, and claim to speak for God, he at least wanted to know who was speaking and calling the shots.

The answer God gave was even more mysterious than the burning bush itself. "I AM WHO I AM," God says. "When the Israelites ask, tell them 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

Thousands upon thousands of pages have been written about this revelation of the divine name. But one thing is clear: the nature of God is rooted in the very nature of being. God is the one who IS. Everything that was, is, or will be comes from God and exists because of God.

That revelatory moment near the beginning of the Old Testament underscores the significance of a similar moment near the beginning of the New Testament. Jesus, who is described in the gospels as a new Moses, repeatedly and intentionally uses the language of God's divine name to describe himself. Seven times in the gospel of John, Jesus introduces himself and names himself with a metaphor beginning with the words "I Am." I am the Bread of Life. I am the Good Shepherd. I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Those who heard these statements would know they were bold, brash, perhaps even heretical, because Jesus was adopting for himself the very name of God. As my New Testament professor Frances Taylor Gench has written, "Only God can speak this way... which is exactly John's point. Jesus can dare to speak the sacred name because he is the Word made flesh who

¹ Exodus 3:17.



‘makes God known.’”² As I see it, the seven “I Am” statements in John represent in the New Testament what the Burning Bush represented in the Old. With these statements, Christ names who he is and reveals his divine nature to the world.

We begin today with a name that is foreshadowed in the very first words in John’s gospel, which we read this morning. *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... What has come into being in him was life, and the life was **the light of all people.**”* Later, when the time and place is right, Christ draws those threads together in the culminating statement *“**I am the light of the world.** Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”*

Through the centuries, biblical scholars have made much of the context in which Jesus utters these words. He said them standing in the outer court of the Temple of Jerusalem during the Festival of Booths, also known as the Festival of Tabernacles or Sukkot. It was one of three pilgrimage festivals when the people of Israel were commanded to go up to Jerusalem. This particular festival commemorated God’s care and protection during the Exodus – the miraculous deliverance of the people from slavery in Egypt, the wandering in the desert, and the ultimate arrival in the Promised Land. This context is significant in two ways.

First, one of the great miracles of the Exodus was the way God led the nation of Israel through the wilderness. By day, the Lord God would go “in front of them in a pillar of cloud,” but at night God would light the way with a pillar of fire. During Sukkot, the light that God used to guide the way through the darkness would have been on everyone’s mind.

Secondly, while Jesus was speaking in the outer courtyard of the Temple, he would have been standing beneath four giant lampstands. They were said to be seventy feet tall, with massive reservoirs of oil to fuel the wicks. For the first six nights of the festival, as darkness fell, men would scale huge ladders to light and trim these lanterns. It is said that the blazing light they cast down from the Temple Mount was strong enough to illuminate the entire city. But on the seventh and final night, the lamps would not be lit. For six nights, brilliant light fell upon the dancing and joyful merriment. But on the final night, the message came in the absence of light, when the darkness reminded the people of what life without the loving presence of God would be like. Some believe that it was on this final night, in the hours just before morning, that Jesus uttered the words “I am the light of the world.”³

In light of this context, his listeners could not have missed point. Jesus was identifying himself as the God who had led them safely through the dangerous darkness of the Sinai wilderness with a pillar of light. He was there with God in the beginning, when the first words “Let there be light” were uttered. And he was the one the prophet Isaiah had foreseen when he wrote that *“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined.”*⁴ He was and is the divine power who lights the darkness. As my professor aptly said, only God speaks like this.

This is what it means for Christ to say “I am the light of the world,” but what about the rest of the proclamation? *“Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness,”* Jesus says, *“but*

² Frances Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), pp. 41-2.

³ Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges, John 8:12, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/john/8-12.htm>

⁴ Isaiah 9:2.

will have the light of life." What does it mean to walk in darkness? What does it mean to have the light of life?

Over the past few days I got a glimpse into that mystery. I was fortunate to attend a two-day retreat on Human Solidarity hosted by The Soul Focused Group. In one of our sessions we talked about two contrasting ways of being in the world. One way is described by the word **paranoia**. It is a combination of the Greek prefix "para," which means irregular or contrary, and the Greek noun "noos," which refers to the mind. So paranoia is an irregular mind, an unhealthy mind. Sadly, when our facilitators asked us about our level of anxiety, and how we were feeling about the world, everyone expressed this kind of worry, a kind of dis-ease that feels a lot like paranoia. The opposite of paranoia is **eunoia**. With the prefix "eu" (which means "well" or "good"), eunoia denotes a "healthy mind" or "a beautiful thinking mind." It is a state of purity and goodwill.

As we talked about these contrasting mindsets, it seemed to me that the dualism is a lot like the difference between darkness and light. What does it mean to walk in darkness? It is a lot like paranoia – fearing what others might do to you... seeing the worst in people... demonizing those who are different than us. But it also has to do with how we see ourselves. Walking in darkness we might feel trapped by circumstances beyond our control... we speak to ourselves in harsh or negative ways, beating ourselves up for mistakes we have made... we crave external validation because deep down we are not so sure we like who we are... we might even wonder if we are worthy of love. We might feel disempowered, without agency to make our lives better. And all of this broken thinking tends to spill out into our lives and relationships. That is what it is like to walk in darkness.

Walking in the light, however, is a much healthier mental state. Walking in the light, we can find the good in others... we can be on the lookout for friends instead of enemies... we can see beauty and harmony in the world. We recognize the inherent good and beauty in ourselves. Walking in the light, we have much less need for external validation, because we are comfortable with who we are.

That is a good start of what it means to walk in the light, but it is still incomplete. What I have said so far can be found in a self-help book, perhaps even a psychology textbook. But the message I am talking about comes from Christ, the Word made flesh. So we are not talking about the light of wisdom or knowledge. This is not the light of reason or common sense or generic morality. This is the light of God that was there in the very beginning... the light that sets people free from bondage... the light that delivers and heals and saves. In other words, walking in the light has everything to do with God. So to walk in darkness is to live like God does not matter. Maybe you believe in God. Maybe you don't. Either way, if God is not real and relevant in our life, if God has no part in how we live and breathe in this world, then we are walking in darkness.

On the other hand, to walk in the light of life is to accept what the epistle of James proclaims, that every good and generous thing, every perfect gift that exists in this world "is from above, coming down from the Father of lights."⁵ To walk in the light of life is to believe not only that God is real, but that God of creation really loves you. It means to have a beautiful thinking mind that seeks to follow Christ in faith, hope, and love.

This is the choice we have. But sometimes we have to walk a bit in the darkness before we can really understand what the light offers to us. I think that is why Jesus waited for a

⁵ James 1:17.

time when people were working hard to remember what it is like to wander in the darkness, waited until then to proclaim his connection to God, the Father of Lights... waited until they paused to give thanks for the guiding light of the pillar of fire... waited until the celebratory brilliance of the Tabernacle lanterns had been extinguished, and darkness had fallen upon the seventh night of Sukkot. When the darkness is real, we understand our need for the light. But not just any light... but the light that was there in the very beginning... the light that will always shine... the light that no darkness, no matter how deep, can ever be overcome... the light of Christ... the light of the world.

Amen.