

March 24th, 2019

John 8:12-20

Pastor Katya Brodbeck - Powell United Methodist Church

“The Light of the World”

When you were a child did you love fireflies? I love them. I remember a few years ago my mom and my other friends from my home church in Russia were visiting NYC. We had a howler day there and went to the Central Park during the day and as the day was getting closer to end and we had plans to go to Times Square when it was completely dark, we thought we would go back to Central Park. And as it was getting darker and darker, we started to see fireflies everywhere. There were hundreds of them shining in the darkness, one after another after another. It was a magical sight!

Light is not only magical, but it is essential to our lives. Our very lives depend on it. Without the sun's energy, we would not be here. Light affects our well-being and our mood. Many of us know that the lack of light can lead us to such condition as seasonal affective disorder. I found myself this year feeling the effect of winter and I never remember a year when I longed for spring and sunshine as bad as this year. In today's passage in eighth chapter of John's Gospel Jesus is proclaiming that he is the Light of the World. Many of you are involved in our church-wide Lenten study “The God we Can Know” by Rob Fuquay and this book helps us reflect on the “I am” statements of Jesus and what Jesus reveals to the world through these statements. So, today we are looking at the statement of Jesus “I am the Light of the world” and what this statement reveals to us in our day and time.

When we look at the Bible, Rob Fuquay says, “the story of the Bible is a story of movement from darkness to light.” In the creation story in the first chapter of the Book of Genesis, the first thing that God created was light. And in the very first verses of John's Gospel, it is called prologue, the poetic account of the moment of creation, it said,

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

Right at the beginning of John's Gospel, John reveals to us the truth about Jesus Christ being present at the time of creation of the universe and bringing about the gifts of light and life into the world. And that that light will always be shining, the darkness will not win it. Another important story of light in the Bible is the story of Exodus, when the Israelites were in the desert and God was leading them as a pillar of fire at night so they could see where they were going. And this story is connected to the context that surrounds these words of Jesus claiming himself to be the light of the world. So, let's turn to it.

From the seventh chapter of John's Gospel we know that Jesus came to Jerusalem for a celebration of the Feast of the Tabernacles. Sometimes this feast is called Sukkot. And our Jewish brothers and sisters celebrate that holiday every fall. This feast invited the Israelites to remember their journey in the wilderness when they were freed from the slavery in Egypt and were on their way to the Promised Land. In Jesus' time there were a lot of different ceremonies during the seven days of the holiday. On one of the nights, we do not know exactly which one, there was a lighting ceremony. The priests would lit four large candelabras in the Women Court of the Temple. Those candelabras were large, about 7 feet tall. The four candelabra symbolized four corners of the world, north, south, east and west. Usually the gates of the temple would be closed after the sacrifices were made but on that day of the feast

the gates were open for everyone to participate in this celebration of light. The crowd rejoiced and danced in the presence of the glorious light. They used their own torches to take the light from the four candelabras. It said that the candelabras and people's torches were giving light to "every courtyard in Jerusalem."

So, it is believed that it is on that night Jesus said these words "I am the Light of the World, whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." What a perfect timing of revealing this truth about himself to the crowd that was surrounded by this glorious light of the lighting ceremony. For those celebrating and dancing on that night light meant so much: the presence of God, guidance on their journeys of life especially in the dark times, the hope and healing, love and peace of the coming Messiah.

I think of ourselves today. If Jesus came and stood among us and told us "I am the light of the world" what would we experience and how would we understand that? Aren't we longing for light? Not only the sunlight, the sunshine in the spring and summer, but also the light of Christ to shine into our hearts and our souls and into our broken world? When you think of Jesus being the light of the world, what do you think of?

When I think of Christ's light, I think of God's guidance as we make decisions in our lives about our jobs and career, a life partner, our health. Some of us have gone or are going through this period of making a decision of choosing a direction in life and heavily relying on prayer and God's guidance in this process. God is providing that light of illumining the path for us guiding every step of the way.

When I think of Christ's light I think of Christ shining light on a truth or a reality that you or I want to keep in darkness or keep hidden. But those things sometimes need to come out of darkness and be brought to light. And sometimes it is just naming the reality and start talking about it. I mentioned seasonal affective disorder at the beginning, and I think of mental illness as that one topic that we prefer not to talk about with others and in church, especially, for the fear of judgement, stigma and embarrassment. We prefer to keep it private. But the truth is that depression and anxiety and other mental illnesses are very real for many of us. On a recent youtube video on 15 psychological facts, they talked about evolving anxiety. They said that about fifteen years ago, a study found that the average high school student was as anxious as the average psychiatric patient in the 1950s. In that last decades mental health conditions and mood disorders have become increasingly common. 1 out of 5 American adults suffer with a mental illness. If we don't suffer ourselves, than we know and love someone who does. The second leading cause of death in teens and young adults is suicide. So, I am saying these things today to simply name them and to simply shed light on them and also to say that Jesus Christ and the church are here to shine the light, to support, love, and walk alongside those who are experiencing mental illness.

When I think of Christ's light I think of peace, healing, and comfort that God gives through others in our lives. I think of our Stephen Ministers who come alongside others who are experiencing dark times, times of grief and loss, loneliness and stress, times when we need to receive the light of Jesus. I think of yesterday devotion in our Lenten Devotional Book that illustrated how Christ's light shines on us through the love and support of others. Kelly Brown, Larry's wife, wrote this devotion and gave me permission to talk about it today. In her devotion, Kelly talked about how sometimes we do not realize at the moment that God is shining light on us through other people. And she talked about her mother-in-law, Carole, how she has been that light of Christ in her life, gently and faithfully supporting her, especially when things were not going well. And Kelly said that over the years as she has looked back, she has come to the realization that God put people in her life at those moments when she needed them." I think of our

Stephen Ministers who come alongside others who are experiencing dark times, times of grief and loss, loneliness and stress, times when we need to receive the light of Jesus.

When I think of Christ' light, I think of you and me here today, of each and everyone here, how we can continue to share that light of Christ with the world that desperately needs it. Our whole world. Our country, and the UMC are in need of Christ light.

In preparation for this morning, I came across a short story with a Dr Seuss character, Cat in the Hat. Who knows Dr. Seuss Cat in the Hat? The story is called "Night Lights" by Tish Rabe and it is a short story about fireflies. And you know what I found out by reading this story? I learned that each species of firefly has a specific flash pattern that helps them recognize each other. So, each firefly species has a unique way to shine their light in the darkness. So, I thought how we are all unique and God calls us to follow Christ and share Christ's light with everyone in our unique way, out of our struggles and out of our joys. And there are so many ways that we can share that.

So, just like the four candelabras in the Temple of that night of the Feast of the Tabernacles was shining the light inviting the people from all corners of the world to come and celebrate God's presence and light, so does Jesus Christ invites us to receive this light and share His light with others. Amen.