

I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

John 8:12, John 9:1-12

August 23, 2009

Merry Christmas!

Yes, I know it's only August, and trust me—I'm not trying to rush the season into starting any sooner than it already does—we'll be hearing Christmas carols on Halloween—mark my word.

But today's "I AM" statement of Jesus, the second one in our sermon series, is usually read in either December or January—in the darkest season of the year. "I am the light of the world" Jesus proclaimed. It reminds me of Christmas—of the light of God being born to shine into the darkness of our lives.

John the gospel writer, however, does not use the image of Jesus as the light of the world with a season of the year in mind.

Instead, he understands it as a season of the soul—the dark night of the soul when many people get lost in the despair of what this world brings.

John was drawn to the light of Jesus, and spoke about it many times in his testimonial about the Christ. Remember when he said in Chapter 1 that in Jesus was life, "and the life was the light of all. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it?"

Probably John was also a fan of the prophet Isaiah who said many millennia before, and, yes, it is another familiar Christmas text,

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.

And in short order the reader is ushered into the dynastic oracle,

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given;
and the government will be upon his shoulder,
and his name will be called

"Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." (Isa. 9:6-7).

Jesus' proclamation "I am the light of the world" is, then, part and parcel of the primary theme of John's Gospel: that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, whose coming, like the announced royal birth in Isaiah 9, brings light to those who walk in darkness.

And who are those people who walk in darkness? Not those who we might assume initially, although today's text might lead us to wonder if Jesus primarily came to bring sight to those who were literally, physically blind.

We all heard_____ read about the miracle of the moment when Jesus took clay, and spat it in, and wiped the mud on the eyes of a man who had been blind from birth. Kind of gross, when you think about it, but the folks of that time thought that spittle was considered to have medicinal value.

Jesus performed this miracle for two purposes: First, to shine light on the misunderstanding of a particular religious teaching, and second, to shine light on the hopelessness we sometimes find ourselves blinded by. This morning we're going to see how Jesus shone his light on both of those dark places, and continues to do so.

It may not be hard for us to comprehend that religion sometimes creates darkness rather than light. Although God gives us the true light of knowledge, our human ambitions begin to dim the gleam of truth we received. It's not a particular problem with the Judeo-Christian tradition—it happens in all religions of the world over time.

That's why the first time Jesus uttered this particular descriptive "I AM" statement in Chapter 8:12, he was on the temple grounds in Jerusalem during Sukkot, aka the Feast of the Tabernacles, had taken place. This was a holiday celebrated by the Jews as they remembered their 40 days of wandering in the wilderness when they slept in make-shift huts. During the 8-day festival, many of the people would have re-enacted their ancestors' camping experience in the desert by spending a night in their own make-shift huts.

Jesus was in the temple courtyard one night as the holiday was coming to a close. He stood in front of the two giant lamps that were lit every night of Sukkot. To give you an idea of how big these lamps were, it was said that their radiance was strong enough to cast light over every quarter of the city of Jerusalem when they were lit at sunset. (James Boice, The Gospel of John, Vol. 2 pp. 321-327)

Thus, it was at sunset that Jesus stood in front of those two lamps that had so much significance to Jews and proclaimed, "I am the light of the world." He chose that time and place as symbolic significance—that the light he had to bring was to the religious teachings that had brought a darkness to the understanding of the nature of God.

Jesus reiterated his self-disclosure on the Sabbath a few days later when he and his disciples came upon the blind man. As they were passing what could only have been a pathetic figure, the disciples asked him the question, "Rabbi, who sinned—this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

Here it was—the religious teaching that had done so much damage to people for years and years. A teaching that presented a cruel God, who punished sinners with physical deformities or illness, or other types of misfortune. It was commonly taught that those who didn't live by the law of God would suffer, or if they didn't suffer, then their children or grand children or great-grandchild to the seventh generation would be punished. Those who were ill, or who suffered a house-fire, or who were poor, were thought to be deserving of their fate. They were unclean, according to the law, and could not be helped, much less touched.

Jesus does both—he touches and heals one who was thought to be unclean—a man blind from birth who religious leaders had probably used as a sermon illustration—"Don't sin, brothers and sisters, otherwise your children may be born like that."

By healing the blind man, Jesus breaks the religious rules left and right. He doesn't worry about the fact that the guy was considered ritualistically unclean.

He doesn't seem to care that it was the Sabbath, and that healing was considered work.

Jesus shone the light on a view of a God that cared about the vulnerable, the weak, the needy. Jesus shone the light of God on the blind man, and his healing was holy, so that the Sabbath was kept holy.

Jesus gave sight to the blind man, but what he was trying to do was to help the people of his time see how they needed to change their perspective. They needed to open their eyes to the needs of the world.

And Jesus still is trying to teach us through these words in John, because many times we still walking down the same dark alley of understanding.

Preacher and writer King Duncan tells about a woman, Kathryn Lindskoog, who has suffered for two decades with multiple sclerosis (MS), a chronic disease that gradually weakens and paralyzes the body. She has been amazed at some of the comments she has received from friends and relatives. A few typical examples:

"You must really like to be sick; you bring so much of it on yourself." That comment was from a nearby relative who never so much as sent a get-well card.

"The reason I have perfect health is that I think right; nobody gets sick unless he thinks wrong." That from another relative.

"I know just how you feel about being crippled; I had a bad case of tennis elbow last month." That from a friend—and with friends like that....

"I know you fake your limp to try to get attention." That comment was from her pastor. He was trying to be funny. Ha ha.

And this last one: "God must cherish you to trust you with this burden."(1)
What?

What kind of God do some people have?

A country preacher was visiting his parishioners after a local flood. He called on a farmer whose crop had washed away and whose cows had all drowned.

"Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth," quoted the preacher, trying to offer some comfort. The farmer looked at him and said drily, "Well, I believe he over did it this time."

The farmer was right. What kind of God do some people have?

Many people were startled to hear TV evangelists Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell blame the bombing of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on God's unhappiness with gays, feminists and People for the American Way. Did these two influential clergymen really mean that God killed thousands of innocent people because God was unhappy with the lifestyles of other people in our land? Is God the ultimate terrorist? What kind of God do some people have? (King Duncan, "What kind of God is that?" esermons.com/John 9)

Jesus' healing power shone the light on this particularly dark world view. The rigid, legalistic teachings of the religious establishment had gotten separated from the intent given early on by the Lord. God wants His children to be whole. God works for the restoration of creation. God calls us into the light of healing love.

Which brings me to the second purpose of Jesus' proclamation this morning. Jesus went to one who was suffering, and laid healing hands on him—not just to correct a wrong teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees; not just to provide an object lesson for his disciples.

Jesus touched the blind man so that he might have life, and have it abundantly. So that he would understand himself that it was not God's pleasure that he suffer, but instead, that it was God's pleasure that he would be whole once more.

I would imagine that there is someone in this very sanctuary who has experienced a tragedy, or is feeling broken in someway. Perhaps there's someone here who is carrying around a burden of guilt. Deep down you have a

feeling that God is punishing you for something you have done by bringing struggle to your life or hurting someone you love.

Write this down. Inscribe it upon your heart: God does not punish children for the sins of their parents, nor does God cause suffering on a judicial whim.

Instead, God comes into our world and proclaims “I am the light of the world. Those who follow me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

A friend of mine named Mark worked at Raytheon for years, steadily climbing the ladder of success. He was married to a beautiful woman, and together they gave birth to their precious daughter, Kay.

But sometime in his early thirties, Mark began to lose his sight. It was a genetic eye disorder, and soon he was completely in darkness. He struggled to encounter his world in a new way—learning to walk with a seeing-eye dog named Huck, and using his other senses to help guide him.

He was making good headway when his tragedy was compounded. Mark’s wife died suddenly in a terrible car accident. His daughter, Kay, was in first grade at the time. He was now a single parent—dealing with his own and his daughter’s grief.

I got to know Mark when Kay was in third grade. He was my co-counselor at JYF camp, the summer church camping program for 3rd-5th graders. I should clarify—there were three counselors that year in my group—we had to include Huck as one because he helped keep the kids in line.

Kids can be squirrely at that age, as some of you know, but that year, for that group of kids, Mark’s loving light shown forth as he talked about how God was with him all the time. He shared with the kids that he used to be scared of the dark when he was young, but that now that he lived in the dark all the time, he was no longer scared, because he felt God’s hand guiding him all the time.—God’s hand was on Huck, too, he said.

I saw Mark in June when I went back to Arizona for my visit. He looked great, and we even danced together at the anniversary party we were attending. Kay was there, too. She had just graduated from college, and has her whole life laid out in front of her.

They are amazing people who never saw their life as punishment from God. Yes, they agree, it did seem unfair. But they wouldn't have become the people they are today if it had been different, and they like who they are. They have come through the heat lamp of life and are stronger for it.

Mark and Kay radiate the light of love they learned about in the teachings of Jesus they received from their church and their pastors. Somehow, in spite of everything, they see God more clearly than most people.

And because of that, they live out a text from another gospel—one found in Matthew when Jesus looked at the crowd gathered—indeed, looks at each one of us today and says, “You are the light of the world...Let your light so shine before all so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

I only pray that I can shine an nth of a degree of brightness that Mark and Kay radiate in their lives—for they are just reflections of Jesus—the light of the world which overcomes all darkness.