

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
I Am the Light of the World
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Isaiah 49:1-6; John 8:1-20

It was preposterous! It was outrageous! It was ridiculous! Here was this man sitting in front of them claiming to be the messiah. And who was he? He was a nobody. He was an untrained, uncredentialed carpenter from Galilee. Sure, maybe he performed some miracles. Sure, he had a large group of followers. But to be the Light of the World? No way. I would assume that for many of us, that when we hear Jesus speaking of himself as being the Light of the World, we assume that he is merely waxing metaphorically. He is speaking of himself as someone who illumines God's way in the world. But his claim that he is the Light of the World is far more than that. It is Jesus staking his claim that he is indeed the long-awaited messiah sent by God to save the world. I say this because he is echoing the words of the prophet Isaiah who has God say to the messiah, "I will give you as a light to the nations that my salvation might reach to the ends of the earth." Jesus' claim was that he was that light...that messiah

What we need to understand about this claim from the perspective of those listening to Jesus was that it was not only suspect because of Jesus' lack of credentials but that it was dangerous. It was dangerous because there had been and would be other would-be messiahs who had come and gone and would come and go during this period. And the result of all their claims and movements was always the same: bloodshed, disaster and death. Their claims and actions led to violence, oppression, and suffering. The last one of these messiahs who would live about a hundred years after Jesus, a man named Simon bar-Kokhba, would lead a revolt resulting in more than a million Jewish deaths and virtually drive the Jews from the Holy Land. In light of these pretenders, if Jesus was to claim the title of Light of the World and the position of messiah, he better be able to prove it. He better have some formidable evidence if he wanted to convince his listeners that he was the real deal. So, they put him on trial, just as they had the woman caught in adultery and asked him for witnesses to testify to his messianic credentials.

Jesus did not back down, yet the evidence he offered them was not convincing...to them. Essentially what he said was that he had two witnesses, the minimum needed in Jewish courts to prove one's point. The first witness was himself. He could witness to his identity because he knew where he had come from and where he was going. The second witness was his father who would tell them exactly who Jesus was. Now for all of us here this morning who are familiar with the Gospel of John, we know to whom Jesus is referring. He is referring to the fact that Jesus is the Word of God made flesh and who came from heaven will return there. We also know that he is the only begotten son who was given to the world to save the world. Needless to say, this was all lost on those listening to Jesus in the Temple. They did not understand why having come from Galilee and then returning there attested to his messianic claims. And since they didn't know his father, that claim was unclear as well. They were therefore not convinced and could not comprehend that he was indeed the messiah. So, had I been there and been Jesus' attorney, I would have called several more witnesses. I would have called all of those involved in the "woman caught in adultery" episode.

Most of us are probably familiar with the story of the woman. But in case not, let's recap. Jesus has opponents who want to discredit him. To do so, his opponents catch a woman in the act of adultery and bring her to Jesus. It seems as if they are hoping he will either condemn her to death, which is the punishment required by the Torah, and thereby lose his followers who see him as compassionate; or he will let her off, thereby showing that he does not believe in Torah and is thus not a good Jew. What Jesus does however, and this is where he demonstrates that he is the messianic Light of the World come to offer God's salvation to the ends of the earth, is that he not only saves and redeems this woman, but he saves and redeems those who were using her. Let me explain. Jesus assumes that the woman is guilty as charged. He does not dispute her crime. What he does though is, first, ask those who brought her to not only examine their consciences but their own guilt under the law. I say this because the Law says that if you see someone doing something wrong, you are to warn them long before condemning them. These people had not warned this woman and so would stand condemned for being as guilty as she if they stoned her. This is what the Light of the World does. The Light of the World saves people by holding them accountable and not condemning them but offering them a chance at redemption. This is also what Jesus does with the woman caught in adultery. He holds her accountable but does not condemn her. He saves her by offering her a second chance to live in God's love and Law. This is what the Light of the World had been called to do, to offer God's salvation to the ends of the earth.

I say this because the Light of the World is to reflect God's light into the world and what God's light does is hold people accountable, yet saves rather than condemns them. God's light held Adam and Eve accountable when they followed the advice of the serpent and ate the fruit. Yet God saved and did not condemn them. God's light held Cain accountable when he killed his brother Abel. Yet God did not condemn him but saved him by protecting and ultimately blessing Cain. God held King David accountable for the great Bathsheba adultery incident. Yet God did not condemn David by removing David as King but instead saved him by allowing David's offspring to lead the nation. God held the nation of Judah accountable for its sins by sending them into exile. Yet God did not condemn them but saved them by bringing them home again. God has held the world accountable for its sins. Yet God did not condemn the world but saved it by sending his only son, Jesus, into the world to become one of us; that in believing we too might be saved and find our way to the fullness of life now and forever. This is what God's light is all about: holding accountable, but then saving and not condemning, as the Gospel of John makes clear again, and again, and again.

I would like you to do something for me right now. I would like you to cup your hands as if you are trying to hold something in them. Now I would like you to look into your cupped hands and imagine a small light beginning to glow in them. And then imagine that light growing slowly brighter and brighter, and becoming warmer and warmer, becoming a ball of light. Allow yourself to bask in the light's brightness and warmth. Then carefully take the light in one hand and place it in a pocket, or on your table, or any place where it is readily accessible. As you do that listen again to Jesus' words. "I am the light of the world, whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." You, my friends have been given the light of life. You have been given the love and grace of the light of the world that will never condemn you but will always save you. Regardless of what you have done, or said, or thought, you have the light. So the next time you feel the guilt, shame and pain because of something you have thought, said or done, pull out the light and remember: you are not condemned but saved and have a chance to begin again.