

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
Wonderful News for Those Who are the Light  
The Rev. Dr. John Judson  
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Isaiah 58:6-9; Matthew 5:14-16

It was one of the most beautiful sights I had ever seen. Standing high in the Rockies, my brother Richard and I watched the sun setting over distant mountains while casting brilliant red and orange hues across the sky. The only problem at that point was how were we going to make it back to the parking lot in the dark. The setting for this moment was that in the summer between my two years in the Peace Corps I had come home to see Cindy and my family. As was my family's custom, we went to Colorado to hike and backpack in the mountains. During dinner the night before Cindy and I were heading to home to Houston, I realized that I had not climbed Flat Top mountain, which was something of a family ritual. I mentioned this to Richard who said we probably had time to make the top before dark. Putting on our tennis shoes, we drove to the trail head which is at 9,500 ft and began our five-mile trek to the summit, which is at 12,300 feet. An hour and half later we made it just as the sun dipped below the horizon. Then, as we donned our down parkas against the cold for the return trip, we pulled out our flashlights, only to realize that we didn't need them. Instead the moonlight was so bright that it not only illuminated our way above the tree line, but through the pine and fir forests through which we walked.

I have been thinking a lot about that hike this week as I pondered Jesus' statement about us being the light of the world. It made me realize just how ubiquitous light is. We flip a switch and suddenly there is light. We walk into dark rooms that are not actually completely dark because they are illuminated by lights from clocks, phones, and cable boxes. We step outside and there are street lights, house lights and spotlights with motion sensors. I think you get my point. In some ways we are never in the dark, always being able to see where we are going. This would not have been true of those who were listening to Jesus. Light was something precious, something amazing. Inside homes, light was rare and weak. It consisted of small olive or fish oil lamps that needed constant refilling and gave off only the barest light. What this meant was that people were dependent on the sun, moon and stars for finding their way in the world. Those heavenly bodies gave protection and direction. They made life possible. It is little wonder then, that light became one of the primary human metaphors for finding one's way, not only physically, but spiritually, morally and ethically.

We can see this metaphor at work throughout the scriptures. Darkness was a time for skullduggery and evil to thrive. It was used to describe those who had lost their way in the world...as we still use it today when we refer to someone who is always in the dark. Light, on the other hand, was used to describe a person's ability to see clearly what ought to be done and how life ought to be lived. Though the scriptures are not dualistic, meaning that life is a contest between the forces of light and darkness, the images of light and dark were central to the Jewish and Christian understanding of life. The question this morning then becomes what does it mean for us to be the light? What does it mean for us to let our light shine before others? To answer this, I want us to take a journey of light so that we can hear what those around Jesus would have heard and understand what they would have understood.

Our journey begins with the realization that only God can bring light. We see this in the very act of creation itself when God's first word is "*Let there be light.*" In the Genesis story, God encounters a chaotic, dark creation that cannot bring about life and flourishing. And so, God speaks light into being; light not being physical light because the sun and moon are later creations, but light as in the life giving reality that God imparts to creation and all that creation contains. What this means for the scriptures is that God alone can give the light of moral and ethical guidance that will lead human beings to the fullness of life. Only by living in God's light can we find true life.

Our journey continues with God giving that light to the world. For Judaism this light comes in two ways, the first of which are the scriptures. We see this in Psalm 119, the longest of the Psalms, which is an ode to God's Torah or Law. In it we read these words, *"Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path."* There is a praise chorus of these words that my former church used to sing every Sunday before we read the scriptures. It was a reminder that it is God's word that sheds light on the path of righteousness that we are called to traverse. The second way God gives the light is through people who interpret the scriptures, many of whom are also called the light of the world. These were rabbis who, because of their ability to interpret and teach the scriptures were referred to as the light of the world...which is a title Jesus would later claim for himself in the Gospel of John. I would guess as well that those listening to Jesus on the mountain would have agreed with that claim.

Next, the scriptures make clear that not only are there rabbis and teachers like Jesus who are the light, but that all of God's people are to be the light. At least four times in Isaiah, the prophet says this to the people that they have been given as a light to the nations. Isaiah 49 puts it this way, *"I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."* In other words, the people are to be the living light by which other nations can see what it is that God desires of humanity. They are to be the light, the example of God's way in the world so that others might have light and life.

Finally, the scriptures describe what it looks like to be the light of the world. This is at the heart of Isaiah 58. *"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly;"* What it means to be the light then is to walk in God's way of righteousness.

Thus when Jesus says to the people on that mountainside that they are the light of the world; that they are to give light to the whole house; that they are to let their light so shine; that their good works are to be seen, they understood. They understood that God had filled them with the light of Torah and righteousness and life and that they were to demonstrate this to the nations so that all people might find their way into God's salvation.

This my friends is what we are called to be and to do as well. We are to be the light of the world. We are to be those whose works are not hidden but are made known to the world so people can see what light looks like and to give glory to God. Granted, in a few more verses Jesus is going to say that when we give our offerings we are to do so quietly, such that our right hand does not know what our left hand is doing. The difference is that our works are not to draw attention to ourselves, "Look at me! Look at me!", but those good works are instead intended to be demonstrations of the light that God has brought into the world through the love and grace of God in Jesus Christ. They are intended to be demonstrations of God's righteousness such that others will want to walk in the light as well. I understand that some of you may feel that this call to be light is a burden. We might ask, "How can I be an example to the world?" My response would be this. I hope that you see this call to be light, not as a burden but as wonderful news. It is wonderful news first because you do not have to shine your light alone. You are part of a light shining community that shines light in ways great and small. That shines light for all people regardless of their gender, skin color, ability, language, income level or sexual orientation. Second, it is wonderful news because your acts do not have to be acts that make the papers or the local news. They can be as simple as thanking the person putting out produce or the person who cleans the shopping carts at the grocery. All of these are acts of light.

This sermon closes out our series on the wonderful news that are found in the beatitudes. Our hope is that you have found some wonderful news for yourself during these difficult times. My challenge to you then for this week is to ask yourself, "How is my light shining into the world in such a way that people give glory to God and want to become light as well?"