

I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

John 8: 12-20

Exodus 13: 17-21

Fourth in a series of six sermons

Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 18, 2007

First Federated Church

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Text: ***“I am the light of the world; all who follow me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life”***(vs. 12)

Several years ago I knew a young middle school student who while chasing a basketball down a driveway did *not* look both ways before running into the street. He ran into the side of a passing car. He was not seriously injured but any parent can imagine what it would be like to get a telephone call at work telling you that your has been hit by a car and taken to the hospital by ambulance.

They raced to the hospital and were shown into the emergency room cubicle where their son lay. He was quite conscious, alert and a bit scared. When she saw him, his mom cried. His dad felt a certain sense of relief. The E.R. staff told them that they wanted to take him X-rays and an MRI to make sure that they didn't overlook any possible internal injuries. As he was being wheeled out of the cubicle his mother assured him that his father and her would be waiting right there for him to get back. His father, a bit of a quipster, said him, “Now son, remember, if you see a bright light, *don't* follow it!”

Of course you know that he was trying to find some humor in the situation. There is a lore that when people pass from this Life that there is a bright warm light that draws them to the Next. The dad, like the mother, was simply saying, “Son, we love you and were so afraid that we were going to lose you. We are overwhelmed with joy that we didn't.”

The gospel of John begins with these words,

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 were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life and life was the light of humanity. The light shines in darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.
(John 1: 1-5)

Since ancient times light has been associated with Life. And, for the Judeo-Christian faith communities, light has also been associated with the Presence of God. For example, the 27th Psalm sang,

The LORD is my light (vs. 1)

and the prophet in Isaiah declared,

The LORD will be your everlasting light. (60:19)

Reflecting back on his hardship Job said,

By his light I walked through darkness (29:3).

The prophet Micah noted,

When I sit in darkness, the LORD will be a light to me (7:8)

In John's gospel, when Jesus says

“I am the light of the world; all who follow me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life”(vs. 12)

the gospel writer was wanting to tell his readers three very important things about Jesus and about our relationship to the Risen Lord. In order to grasp some of the subtle nuances we need to understand the context in which Jesus spoke.

It was at the time of the Feast of the Tabernacles. The Feast of the Tabernacles recalled Israel's 40 years of wandering in the Wilderness before finally entering the Promised Land. It commemorated how the LORD led the Israelites during that whole journey.

You may recall in our Old Testament lesson that the LORD led the people around the land of the Philistines by being a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. The Almighty did this because they people were too weak to face the Philistines. Their time to face the Philistines would come, but not until much later. For now they had to learn to live together as free people. This was the early “nation building” phase of their life together.

The LORD led them in their journey by appearing as a pillar of cloud by day and as a pillar of fire by night. This constant presence allowed the Israelites to travel by day and by night. They were constantly led by the One who called Moses from a burning bush.

By the time of Jesus, the Feast of the Tabernacles was celebrated in the Temple courtyard with large oil filled lamps that burned throughout the entire festival. The linen garments of the Temple priests served as wicks for the lamps. Ancient accounts tell us that the lamps burned so brightly that at night there was not a courtyard in all of Jerusalem that did not reflect the light of the lanterns.

It was against this background that Jesus declared, *I am the light of the world.*

One of the most obvious things that would have struck the readers of the gospel would be the realization that Jesus is identified as the One personified in the twin pillars of cloud and fire and celebrated at the Feast of the Tabernacles. Once again, in the words of the letter to the Colossians, He is the manifestation—or Incarnation—of the invisible God.

Perhaps the simplest explanation of the Incarnation is that in Christ is little story that I shared with many of you at Christmas. In case the story is unfamiliar to you I will share the *Reader's Digest* condensed version. It is about a child named Peter and an unnamed hermit. The story takes place over a hundred years in a small village at the foot

of the Alps. It's Christmas Eve and in that village there was a tradition that on Christmas Eve the members of the church invite visitors to worship with them. Peter decided to invite a hermit who high above the village. It took him all day to make the climb and when he finally reached the hermit's hut it was dusk. He knocked at the hermit's door and when the hermit—who was not accustomed to visitors—answered the door he was surprised to find a boy standing there. The boy introduced himself as Peter and he invited the hermit to the Christmas Eve services that night in the village below. The hermit told Peter that it would soon be dark and that the path would be treacherous. Peter needed to spend the night and the next day the hermit would accompany Peter to the village below. That night a fierce storm blew in and in the midst of the storm Peter and the hermit heard a flock of birds. As they peered out a window they saw that the birds were trying to huddle in the light of the hut the glistened on the ground. Peter said that they had to do something, so the hermit, not wanting to disappoint the boy stepped out into the storm and called to the birds. "Come inside and be warm." The birds, though, seeing his shadow they were frightened and flew off into the night. When the hermit came back into the hut Peter asked him how they could have made the birds understand that they meant no harm. The hermit thought for a moment and then said, "I guess that the only way that we could have made them understand would have been if I could have become a bird and told them."

That my friends, is the essence of the Incarnation. In Christ God became one of us. The Eternal took on the form of the Temporal.

A second thing that the lesson tells us is that just as the LORD led the people of Israel through the wilderness, so Christ leads his disciples through the wilderness of Life.

In the words of that old hymn,

He leadeth me, O bless'd thought!
O words with heavenly comfort fraught!
Whate'er I do, where'er I be
Still 'tis God's hand that leadeth me.

Sometimes mid scenes of deepest gloom,
Sometimes where Eden's bowers bloom,
By waters still, over troubled sea,
Still 'ti His hand that leadeth me.

Wesleyan theologians call this *Prevenient Grace*; the grace that precedes us; goes *before* us. Calvinists call this grace *Providential Care*; the care that *surrounds* us in Life. No matter what we call it, there is some comfort in knowing that none of us can ever get "ahead" of God. God can never be surprised.

Wherever we find ourselves in Life's journey, the One who made the Heavens and the Earth, the Resurrected Lord, is already there waiting for us. *Lo, Jesus promised, I am with you always; even until the end of the age.* (Matthew 28:30)

Third, we are also reminded that just as the Israelites could see their path more clearly the closer they drew to the twin pillars of cloud and fire, so we understand our purpose in life more clearly the closer we draw to Jesus.

The Risen Lord is our compass, helping us keep our bearings; guiding us on our way. The way to keep focused; to keep close, is both easy and arduous. It is easy because everyone can do it. It is arduous because it takes discipline. Discipline and Disciple come from the same root word.

This past week I had the privilege of taking three high school senior from Notre Dame to one of our community's Rotary meetings. When I agreed to do this I chuckled and commented that God has a great sense of humor; to send a Protestant pastor to serve as hosts to three Roman Catholic students. I guess that it is a form of evangelism—I'm just not sure who was being evangelized!

On our way to the meeting, in the course of our conversation, they talked about what they had given up for Lent. It was the usual—chocolate or some other sweet, red meat, things that we could all live well without—not necessarily *better* but *well*.

I came this close to asking them what they were going to *do* to fill the hole left by what they were giving up, but I resisted the temptation. It would have gotten into a theological discussion that I simply wasn't up to at the moment. Giving something *up* for Lent can be a spiritual discipline but it can only be a spiritual discipline if it draws us closer to God. It is not nearly as important to *give something up* as it is to *take something on* for the glory of God.

During the remaining days between now and Easter, I encourage you, if you have not already done so, to begin to develop some spiritual disciplines that will help you draw closer to God.

Be disciplined in the habit of worship. Begin a program of prayer. Become a part of a small Bible study group. Do something for someone else without thought of reward or recognition. When we do any or all of these things we will discover that we are drawing closer to the One who proclaimed Himself to be *the light of the world*.

To God be the glory. Amen.