

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 2:1-5
SECOND LESSON: John 8: 12-20
November 27, 2022

FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT

“Light and Darkness”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

I have heard a lot of sermons over the years about Jesus being the light of the world. What I have never heard is one within the specific Jewish context of when these words were spoken. And this is an interesting oversight, because everything Jesus said had a context that provides us with a wider and deeper insight. The context here is the end of the Feast of Tabernacles.

Because we are fortunate to have so many Jewish neighbors many of us have seen some of these “tabernacles” or temporary structures erected once a year and left up for seven days. Sometimes there are outdoor meals and celebrations. The Feast of Tabernacles is a remembrance of the time the people of Israel spent in the wilderness. Light is also part of this feast, because a mysterious pillar of fire that brought light protected and guided the people on their journey. Scripture says there was a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. In the temple at the time of Jesus the priests filled huge oil lamps on tall stands that blazed light for miles. The people danced and celebrated in the light, remembering the light that had guided, protected and comforted their ancestors. The day after these celebrations ended Jesus stood in the same courtyard where the lamps had been lit and the celebrations had taken place and said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

Doesn't knowing the context make a difference? Jesus was not making a random statement out of nowhere. People would have known why he said what he did. They would have understood that he was identifying himself with the pillar of light, with divine guidance, with God's presence. It was an audacious claim, but there was a logic to it.

Jesus was engaged in a debate with some Pharisees when this conversation took place. The underlying theme was his identity. Who are you Jesus? Are you the Messiah? Are you Elijah? Are you just some random prophet? Jesus' response that he was “the light” was not what they would have been expecting. This was close to a claim to divinity. But they didn't confront him on that. Instead, they chose the legal argument! Jesus, they said, was appearing as his own witness. According to scripture two witnesses are necessary. Therefore, what Jesus said had no validity. But the guidance about witnesses was for the courtroom. It was about accusations of guilt or innocence. One person alone could not accuse another and have it stand up in court. The Pharisees took this principle and applied it inversely. One person on

his own could not make a claim to divine authority without another witness. So, Jesus played the game, answering, “Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid, for I know where I came from and where I am going. But you have no idea where I come from or where I am going.” And Jesus went on to say, “I pass judgment on no one. But if I do judge, my decisions are true, because I am not alone. I stand with the Father, who sent me.” If they were going to come up with courtroom imagery, he could too. Of course, they asked him who his father was and he responded, “You do not know me or my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also.”

I can imagine the Pharisees were infuriated by Jesus.

I, personally, am not fond of conflict. Conflict wears me down and wears me out. But Jesus seemed to be in constant conflict, and he was not afraid to boldly state what he knew to be true. It is not at all surprising that he had enemies. Jesus did not play the political games of currying favor and following the party line in order to get power. He had a short period of time and a different message to get across. But I am genuinely sympathetic to those who found his message outrageous and offensive. Normal people don't say things like this. But Jesus didn't meet the criteria of a lunatic. They couldn't just write him off as unbalanced. He was perfectly lucid, had a huge following, and occasionally did things that were downright miraculous. He did not fit.

John's gospel with its “I am” statements is the last gospel to be written. As a result, many question how accurate it is. The difference in style from the other gospels, however, is likely to be because it was the product of an educated committee. The apostle John was a very old man with a low level of education. But John's gospel is written in excellent Greek. An authorship theory that I favor is that John had a gathering of educated young men around him, Christians who were eager to put down his memories in writing. They may have added their own stylistic flare, but the stories were John's. There are certainly things found in John that are not in the other gospels, but that is probably because people remember things differently and with different emphasis. In addition, the culture these men were trying to reach was primarily Gentile, more interested in spiritual mysteries than miracles.

What does it mean for us that Jesus is “the light”? The pillar of fire represented the presence of God. God guided the people and guarded the people. God stayed with them. Light enables us to see where we are going. Light reassures us. Light scares off predators. And as most of us know, light also shows up the dirt. It's easy to pretend the house is clean when there's only a small lamp on in the corner. Switch on the overhead light and it's all over but the crying. Every spider web, every pile of crumbs and dirty footprint, every dusty baseboard and surface—it all shows. We want the comfort and reassurance of Jesus when everything around us feels dark. We want his guidance when we don't know where to go. We definitely want the spiritual protection he provides. But that spotlight on dirt, that we would often like to do without. But light isn't a partial gift. When we walk in the light and when we walk with the light, everything is involved. I may want to say, “Jesus, you stay right here while I take this little trip down a dark alley. I'll be back when I need you.” But it doesn't work that way. Because when I do go down that dark alley, I find that that darned light has come with me! I will see things I don't want to

see. I will recognize shallowness for what it is. Exploitive relationships will be exposed. The empty promises of money and connections will look . . . empty. And as much as we all may want to be fooled and seduced, it just won't last. Because once the light dwells within us, we can't hide from the truth anymore.

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." In John 1:5 we are told, "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. Some translations read, cannot "comprehend" it. Both meanings are valid. The world does not understand Jesus, and has never managed to successfully pigeonhole him. Many have tried of course. Different versions of Christianity have claimed that Jesus is on "their side" and against all the others. But Jesus does not take sides. Jesus is light and truth. When he walked the earth, they tried to bully him into submission, ridicule him into irrelevance, and defeat him with fine-tuned logical arguments. Finally, they tried to silence him in death. None of it worked. Jesus rose from the dead. The light still shines in the darkness.

In this season of Advent we proclaim that Jesus is the light of the world. We look forward to his coming. But let us welcome more than the baby in the manger. Let us welcome the adult Jesus of Nazareth. He brings the light of safety and love to us. He also brings the light of truth and insight, revealing things as they really are whether we want to see them or not. And he brings the light of protection from all spiritual evil, the light of salvation. Amen

Isaiah 2:1-5

² This is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem:

² In the last days

the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established

as the highest of the mountains;

it will be exalted above the hills,

and all nations will stream to it.

³ Many peoples will come and say,

"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,

to the temple of the God of Jacob.

He will teach us his ways,

so that we may walk in his paths."

The law will go out from Zion,

the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

⁴ He will judge between the nations

and will settle disputes for many peoples.

They will beat their swords into plowshares

and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nation will not take up sword against nation,

nor will they train for war anymore.

⁵ Come, descendants of Jacob,

let us walk in the light of the Lord.

John 8: 12-20

¹² When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." ¹³ The Pharisees challenged him, "Here you are, appearing as your own witness; your testimony is not valid."

¹⁴ Jesus answered, "Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid, for I know where I came from and where I am going. But you have no idea where I come from or where I am going. ¹⁵ You judge by human standards; I pass judgment on no one. ¹⁶ But if I do judge, my decisions are true, because I am not alone. I stand with the Father, who sent me. ¹⁷ In your own Law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is true. ¹⁸ I am one who testifies for myself; my other witness is the Father, who sent me."

¹⁹ Then they asked him, "Where is your father?"

"You do not know me or my Father," Jesus replied. "If you knew me, you would know my Father also." ²⁰ He spoke these words while teaching in the temple courts near the place where the offerings were put. Yet no one seized him, because his hour had not yet come.