The Light

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I traveled to Cleveland this week for a meeting. I was looking forward on the return trip to working on this sermon. I had my study materials with me, and I anticipated an hour-and-a-half of uninterrupted time to devote to this sermon.

The airline personnel announced our plane was ready for boarding. There was a woman at the front of the line who caught my attention. She kept waving frantically to her friend, standing near me, to cut in front of the line and board with her. She was talking loud enough that everybody could hear. She wanted her friend to know that she had been sipping Chardonnay at the President’s Club Lounge. She was loud! I thought to myself, “Please, Lord, don’t make me sit next to her.”

I boarded the plane. Fortunately, she wasn’t seated next to me. Once I had buckled myself into the seat belt, though, that same loud voice resumed talking. There she was, seated directly in front of me. She proceeded to talk to her friend all the way to DC. I couldn’t concentrate on my sermon; I heard every word she said. I tried sticking my fingers in my ears and covering my head with a pillow, to no avail. She discussed her favorite wines and books she had read. She droned on about the deluxe features of her new cell phone and talked at length about putting a fraud alert on her credit card.

I debated in my mind, do I ask her to speak more softly or quietly burn a hole in my seat? I tried to pray about it, but I must confess, unkind, uncharitable thoughts began to take shape within me.

I could sense other people’s annoyance with her, also. This woman was oblivious to her surroundings. She was totally in the dark about the effect she was having on other people. She was, to use the jargon of our day, clueless!

Today’s sermon topic centers on the light of Christ. Some people are oblivious to the light of Christ. They’re totally in the dark. They refuse to think deeply about such things. Elizabeth Barrett Browning expressed well the spirit of our age:

“Earth’s crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afame
with God; But only those who see take off their shoes, The rest sit around it and pick blackberries.”

We are focusing this Advent on the prologue to John’s gospel. On the first Sunday of Advent, we devoted our attention to the Word: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God” (1:1). Last Sunday, we concentrated on the Life: “What has come into being as life” (1:4).
Today, on this third Sunday of Advent, we turn our attention to the Light: “What has come into being was life and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it” (1:4-5).

John intentionally connects redemption to creation in his gospel. John’s opening words, “In the beginning,” correlate precisely to the initial verse in Genesis: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (1:1).

John declares that Jesus, as the divine Word (logos), existed as God from the beginning. Jesus didn’t come into existence at Bethlehem, he existed as God from the beginning. He even participated in the work of creation.

Light and life in John 1:4-5, are themselves creation words. God’s initial act of creation was fashioning light. God’s first recorded speech are the words, “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3). God creates light. This light, in turn, gives life.

In biological terms, we call this light-to-life process photosynthesis. Plant leaves serve as solar collectors. Photosynthetic cells in plant leaves convert sunlight into sugar, which is later adapted as fuel for plants.

Our bodies undergo a similar process. A cholesterol-like substance in our skin absorbs ultraviolet light from the sun and converts it into Vitamin D, so essential for producing calcium for bone development.

Light and life in John’s gospel often appear juxtaposed to each other. In John’s prologue we read, “In him was life and the light was the light of all people” (1:4). Jesus declares in John, “I am the light of the world; whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but have the light of life” (8:12; 9:5; 12:46).

John depicts Jesus as both a life-giver and light-bearer. He gives life, he gives light.

Light has two essential properties. Light exposes darkness. Light expels darkness. First, light exposes darkness. Light brings everything to the light.

Several years ago, there was a news story about a big, burly lineman who played football for the University of Michigan. The Michigan coach had given his players specific instructions about curfew the night before their showdown with arch rival Ohio State. The Michigan coach wanted his players to have a good night’s sleep before their big game. This lineman, however, wanted to experience the night life in Columbus, so he placed the floor lamp in his bed and surrounded it with pillows and covers, so it would look like he was already asleep in bed. When this lineman was convinced it looked authentic, he slipped out to join his friends. The coach responsible for bed check opened the door of this player’s room and saw what he thought was his player asleep. He then turned on the light. The pillows and covers still looked the part wrapped around the lamp, but now the floor lamp lit up the bed and betrayed the deceptive lineman’s darkness.

Not too swift, to use a floor lamp in the cover-up. But remember, he
Don’t look at me, God.

was a lineman! When my coach used to repeat something in practice, he would say, “All right now, once more for the lineman.”

Darkness in the Bible is often used as a metaphor for human sin. Jesus said in John 3, “Light has come into the world, but the people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil; for all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed” (3:19-20).

We resist the light because we don’t want our deeds exposed. It’s little wonder that most crimes are committed under the cover of darkness.

Dallas Willard writes about a two-and-a-half-year-old girl playing in her backyard, who learned the secret of making mud. She called the mud “warm chocolate.” Her grandmother was reading nearby. This little girl offered to make warm chocolate for her grandmother, so she said as sweetly as a two-and-a-half-year-old can say it, “Don’t look at me, Nana. Okay?” As this little girl continued to make warm chocolate, she said several times in quick succession, “Don’t look at me, Nana. Okay?”

Willard makes the observation, “The tender soul of a little child shows us how necessary it is to us that we be unobserved in our wrong.”

“Don’t look at me” is essentially what Adam and Eve express to God after they eat the forbidden fruit. “Where are you?” God asks. Adam answers, “I heard you in the garden and I was afraid…so I hid” (Genesis 3:10). We don’t want to be observed in our wrongdoing. Don’t look at me, God.

Plenty of people are afraid of the dark. But some people are afraid of the light. Plato said it this way: “We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark. The real tragedy of life is when people are afraid of the light.”

Light exposes darkness. Light also expels darkness.

When author Robert Louis Stevenson was 12-years-old, he was intrigued with a man who was lighting gas lamps. When he was asked about his fascination for what the man was doing, young Stevenson replied, “I am watching a man cut holes in the darkness.”

What a vivid picture of what Jesus Christ can do for people. He can cut holes in our darkness.

I was raised in the country, far away from the illumination of street lights. It’s dark in the country, really dark. Some nights, bereft of moonlight, become so dark that you can’t distinguish the hand in front of your face. I would, as a child, occasionally awaken at night to use the bathroom or investigate a strange sound. I would run my hand along the wall, groping for the light switch. When I found the switch, I would flip it and suddenly the whole room was illuminated. Everything that had been shrouded in darkness was now bathed in light.

Jesus Christ illumines our darkness. He helps orient us to our surroundings. His light enables me to see things for what they really are. “Your Word, O Lord, is a lamp to
Let Jesus Christ cut a hole in your darkness.

my feet and light to my path” (Psalm 119:105). Wherever you are going, Jesus can point the way.

God led Israel with a cloud by day and pillar of fire by night in the Old Testament. People followed this cloud and fire all the way from the land of slavery through the desert wilderness to the Promised Land. This picture of light leading people harmonizes perfectly with Jesus’ directive to follow him as disciples. His illumination makes movement possible. “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but have the light of life.”

We talk a great deal in this church about Jesus’ call to discipleship. A disciple is essentially one who follows. We are learning all our lives what it means to follow Jesus. His illumination makes our movement possible. “Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but have the light of life.”

“Whoever” is the emphatic form of the pronoun “who.” Whoever means “no matter who.” “Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but have the light of life.”

You may not want Christ to expose your darkness. But you need not fear his scrutiny, for his examen is one of love.

Where, today, do you want Christ to expel your darkness? Where do you seek his illumination? Perhaps it is a decision you are facing. It might be a deep seated anxiety, a persistent fear, a nagging worry, a secret obsession or reoccurring thought. Let Jesus Christ cut a hole in your darkness.