

West Branch Friends Meeting
December 18, 2016
10:30 AM
"The Light of the World"

This morning I'd like to reflect upon light...how Jesus is referred to as the light of the world, and how we are called to be light. Listen to these verses from John, chapter 1 verses 1-9.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made, without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning the light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world."

For the past several years *I've* thought of the months of November through February as the four dark months of the year. It gets dark so early in the evening that it often feels like 9 o'clock rather than the 6 o'clock hour. But at least with the winter solstice, which arrives on Wednesday at 5:44 AM, we know this signals we will only have more light from this day forward until June 21st when daylight starts to recede again.

I wish I liked the dark evenings better, but I just love the daylight, especially as I get older and don't enjoy driving at night as much. Then I think about times when our electricity would go out and it was night. No light from clocks on all your appliances and bedsides, no lights on all your electronics, no street lights. Only should you be so lucky as to have a clear night and a full moon to help illuminate your home. And, of course, as soon as the lights go out there's the often scramble for flashlights, candles, matches, lighters...anything to get rid of the darkness because it seems like we are never prepared for it!

When I was in Africa for three weeks, it was typical for the electricity to go out in the evenings, but we were prepared with solar lamps that were set out during the day and provided light for us in the evenings because we were prepared.

The reason I wanted to talk about light this morning is simple: both Hanukkah and Christmas have to do with light. Here's some historical background thanks to Bishop John Shelby Spong's research.

First, I think we have to recognize that religion is always a very human creation. Every religious tradition participates in and is shaped by cultural factors, time-bound by understandings of the world of nature, and prevailing tribal prejudices. Nothing illustrates this better than to understand the origins of both Hanukkah and Christmas, especially how those celebrations were placed into the calendars of the western world when daylight was in short supply.

Hanukkah was not an Old Testament festival; in fact, it developed rather late in Jewish history. It was designed to celebrate the time when a military leader, Judas (nicknamed "The Hammer" – or Maccabees in Hebrew) drove the Syrian king and his army out of the Jew's land. When the Syrians had occupied the land, in order to show the contempt they felt for the Jews, they replaced the sacred Jewish symbols with pagan ones. In the Holy of Holies – where Jews believed God dwelled – the Syrians had placed the head of an unclean pig – an abomination to the Jews.

When Judas Maccabees and his victorious army of guerilla fighters entered the city of Jerusalem in triumph, they immediately went to the temple and rededicated it for its sacred purposes. Judas then lit the eight-branched candelabra called the Menorah to initiate a time of great celebration, and he called upon the Jews of every succeeding generation to remember the moment. The candles then were said to have burned for eight days. In the minds of the Jewish faithful, this act restored light to a dark time in their history,

For Christians, the great festival that interrupts the darkness of human history is called Christmas; in the old tradition this twelve day celebration lasted from December 25th to January 6th and was designed

to recall the birth of Jesus who, the Christian faith system asserted, came to be called the light of the world. The nativity narratives, created by second-generation Christians, provided the content for this observance. In the earliest birth story of Jesus, written by Matthew somewhere between 80 and 85 years after Jesus' death, the primary symbol of light was a star – bright, radiant, and beautiful – that illuminated the darkness of the night. This star was said to have had the power to guide the Magi through that darkness to the birthplace of this newborn savior in Bethlehem.

In Luke's account of Jesus' birth, written 8 to 10 years after Matthew's, the light symbol was not a star but a resplendent angel accompanied by a heavenly host who cracked the midnight sky with heavenly brightness. At this event the tradition said that the angels announced the birth of Jesus, the "true light," who "came down from heaven."

Although historical records from that period are scant and there is no clear record of either the conquest by Judas Maccabees or the actual time of Jesus' birth, both traditions chose to locate the celebrations in the dead of winter. As far back as human records go, it is clear that people in the northern hemisphere have observed with acts of worship that moment when daylight stopped its retreat into darkness and began its march back into the world.

The human yearning for light to come to a dark world helped shape both Hanukkah and Christmas which is why both are celebrated in the darkest month of the year. Those of us living today probably have trouble imagining the fears of our human ancestors because we live in an artificially lighted world. We can take care of the darkness just by flipping a switch, turning on our cars' headlights, or finding our destinations with electric streetlights and neon signs.

However, the moon and stars provided the only light of night for our ancestors. When the new moon offered no light, they had only the distant twinkling stars, and only then when there were no clouds. The vast majority of humans who have inhabited this earth lived with the presence of unconquered darkness.

We have our calendars and our clocks to help us understand the darkness. We've all had many science courses during our years of education, and we know all about the earth's axis and rotation that causes our different amounts of sunlight each season. But when ancient people did not understand the scientific basis for light and darkness, it is easy to understand why mythology and ritualistic acts were wrapped around these mysterious natural wonders. In fact, many lived in constant fear that one year the darkness that came each winter would finally capture the light of the sun forever and doom their lives to be lived forever in darkness.

I think it's important that we understand that religious truth, like all truth, can only emerge out of human experience. The only way for the Christmas yearning for peace on earth can be achieved is for every religious system to face its human origins, and to recognize that all worshipers are nothing but human seekers walking into the mystery and wonder of God. A God who is beyond anything that human minds can finally imagine. In our observances of Hanukkah and Christmas this year, this is an important understanding.

Jesus is said to have reminded us that WE are the light of the spiritual world.

Matthew 5:14-16 encourages us with these words from The Message: "You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand - shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven."

So how can we be light during the dark times? We all have periods of darkness in our lives. Every Christmas I am faced with the absence of a son, his wife, and their four children. It's a shadow that always inhabits each of my family celebrations.

So we have to first be ready to recognize when someone is facing darkness, even living with daily darkness. One big thing we can do is to recognize that this is a dark season for many more than we realize. Those who have no loved ones to share the day with, those whose loved ones live too far away, those who are ill or have life-ending issues to deal with. And all those living in countries where bombs are a daily occurrence, live in both literal and figural darkness.

We are called to be light and there are many ways we can be light to all people suffering in darkness just as soon as these fellow spiritual travelers are brought to focus in our lives.

We can do this...:

- by listening
- by offering prayers
- by bringing meals
- by providing transportation
- by holding the hand of one suffering
- by a gentle hug
- by a word of kindness
- by a note of appreciation
- by a note of thanks
- by a phone call
- by a letter to a congress person stressing the power of peace and laws that need to be passed or vetoed
- by supporting any group that offers food and health care for those in war-torn countries

Hanukkah and Christmas were both celebrations created to celebrate the light conquering the darkness. Even more important, **we** were created to bring light into our own worlds. No hiding our lights even when we get stressed out with all the trappings of the season.

I need to take the time; **I** need to do a better job being the light! Because here's what John 8:12 says:

"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."

And finally, a friend of mine shared this quote with me; not knowing this week's message was to be about light. For me it is a great motto to have!

"Forget your perfect offering, there is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in".

-Leonard Cohen