

Christmas Light

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CHILDREN'S TIME

Christmas Day was a few weeks ago, but we are still in the Christmas season and you can tell because we still have decorations and lights up in the sanctuary. I think that this season is the most wonderful season of the year! Do you agree? I especially love the lights. Some neighborhoods, like mine, have a contest to see who can decorate their yard and house the best. Sometimes you can even see pictures and videos of the winners too.

Did you drive around before Christmas to see all of the lights? People can get so caught up in the beauty of the lights that they might think that the lights are what Christmas is all about. But of course it isn't. The lights are just reminders of the One True Light that came to bring light into the world. And we need light to see where we are going, don't we?

Some people take down their lights right after Christmas, but lots of lights are still up in yards and all

through town here in Birmingham. So, enjoy all those lights as long as they are up and remember that Christmas lights can remind us of Jesus, who came to bring light into the world for all people.

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Jesus gives us light inside us and our job is to share that light with everyone around us. There's a song about this that we can sing...

This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.

This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.

This little light of mine I'm gonna let it shine, let it shine, let it shine

Everywhere I go, I'm gonna let it shine ...

SERMON

We're going to play a word association. What comes to mind when you think about light? Raise you hand...

Light is a universal symbol. It transcends cultures, languages, generations, and religions. Light

holds powerful meaning for all variety of people through time.

During Christmas Eve, we talked about how the Celts understood the dark season as a time of creativity and new birth, not as the evil opposite of light. That understanding of seasons is a different conversation than the one we are going to have today.

Today we are talking about a different kind of darkness that we can live in that stifles our soul, that smoothers our spirit and leaves us diminished in our expression of life. We are talking about a darkness that blinds us from the purposes of God in the world.

We can dwell in that kind of darkness, can't we?

And then the light comes — it illuminates the ways of God, and in God's light both inner things and outer things become clear — and we see how the presence of God makes a difference in the world.

The book of John says a lot about Jesus and light.

READ JOHN 8:12

Jesus, a unique human being, came into the world as the light of

all life, to illuminate God's ways for all humanity.

This isn't the first time that we find light in the book of John. The book begins with the idea of light and an understanding that God is light. Listen to the first five verses of chapter one:

*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 came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and **the life was the light of all people**. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

What an interesting thing to say, when in later chapters, Jesus was killed. It would seem that the world got the better of him.

But no, John was making a point that the ways of God are akin to light and distinct from the ways of darkness, which work against the light.

John's book begins with reflections of God's creation in Genesis. He also starts chapter one "In the beginning..." And just like Genesis, John talks about light being created

in the beginning. John says that the original life, the real life that God created and infused into all creation, including you and me, is going to win out in the end. The real life, the real light is brighter than anything that has since polluted it, dimmed it, fogged it.

Jesus said that darkness did not overcome it — and never would!

Light imagery is also repeatedly used by the prophet Isaiah who said that Israel was to be the true light for all the world.

In Jesus' day, it seemed pretty clear that Israel had dropped the ball and neglected their responsibility to be the light. They were trapped inside their own religious rituals.

They had forgotten who their real God was. They needed to come into the light of Jesus and remember!

If the Jewish leaders of the day read John's gospel and were honest with themselves, perhaps they could understand how they had separated themselves from God. Perhaps they could re-orient themselves to what God was currently doing in the world and become truly alive.

The drama playing out in this passage of John, comes at the time as a festival. This was the Festival of Booths, also called the Festival of Tabernacles. This was a joyous yearly festival at the time of the grape and olive harvest in the fall and was centered up at the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

During the festival, the people of Israel would build a sukkah and live in it for a week. A sukkah was a small shelter with a thatched roof of palm fronds and decorated with the fruit from the harvest. The sukkah commemorated the temporary shelters that the Hebrew people lived in during their time in the wilderness after being freed from slavery in Egypt before they arrived in Canaan.

During the festival, Israelites would reenact the stories of the people in the wilderness and highlight God's presence and provision. They recalled how Moses often encouraged them to remember how God provided for them and that they did not do it themselves.

This is why they lived in small humble shelters.

Among all of the celebrations during this week, they lit huge lamps in the Court of Women at the

Temple. This was also called the Middle Court because it sat between the Court of Gentiles (for non-Jews) and the Court of Israel, where Jewish men were permitted.

They would light these high lamps in the evening, sing and dance, and recall the stories of God's provision, protection, and salvation for them with a pillar of fire during the night in the desert. This celebration would last all night long until the sun came up.

In the morning, before concluding the celebration, they would turn their backs to the sun rising in the east, to remember that it was God they worshiped, not the sun, like some of their ancestors.

Think of the geography as part of this scene. The Temple Mount was high in elevation, and from there people could look down over Jerusalem. Imagine the lamps positioned high in the court shining down into the city. It must have been beautiful. The light was so bright that it was known to fill every courtyard in the city of Jerusalem.

Imagine that it was in this light that Jesus stood, with lamps blazing about him, as he declared "I am the light of the world."

Jesus was claiming to provide a greater salvation than Israel had ever experienced — greater than in the times of Moses. Jesus would save them not only from a mighty Pharaoh or Roman emperor, but from all forces that have rebelled against God, and which sat behind every force of evil in the world.

Jesus brought not only deliverance and salvation, but the promise of a life of light in the midst of the darkness in which we live — and this light isn't at a distance somewhere, but has been given directly to us.

Jesus said "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will **HAVE** the light of life."

This light is a gift that we possess when we follow Jesus, not something that will come and go. This provides for us the real and true life from God.

But remember that God's light was never intended just for us, but for the whole world through us.

How might you share the light?