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The Gospel of John
XXVI. The Light of the World
John 8:12-30

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“I am the light of the world,” says Jesus. In so saying, Jesus is touching upon all sorts of Biblical connections, beginning with the Creation story. In the very first act of creation, God speaks out over the dark and formless void, *“Let there be light!”*¹ And suddenly there was light. *“I am the light of the world,”* says Jesus, the Word through whom all things were made. Much, much later, God speaks through the prophet Isaiah of a salvation which shall one day come upon a people, a world, lost in the darkness of human sin: *“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.”*² *“I am the light of the world,”* says Jesus, who comes to save us. And at the very beginning of our Gospel, John draws upon this same theme in setting the stage for Jesus’ Incarnation: *“In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it . . . The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.”*³ *“I am the light of the world,”* says Jesus.

But there is yet one more Biblical connection regarding Jesus’ statement that He is the light of the world – and I believe it is the connection which most helps us understand what Jesus is saying to us this morning. It is a connection hinted at by the fact that both chapters seven and eight of John have centered upon Jesus’ presence at the Feast of Booths – the annual commemoration of God’s care for His people as He led them through the wilderness for forty years following their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, led them forty years through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. Jesus has already lifted up and applied to Himself two of the most important ways in which God took care of His people during that long wilderness wandering. God fed His people in the wilderness by the daily provision of manna, which was baked into bread.⁴ Jesus has announced that He is the “Bread of Life” – saying to the people, *“Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.”*⁵ And God provided for His people in the wilderness the life-giving gift of water in that desert landscape.⁶ Jesus has announced that He is the source of “Living Water,” – saying to the people at the Feast of Booths, *“If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’”*⁷

And, in the wilderness, as celebrated during the Feast of Booths, a third example of God’s care for them: God had daily led His people through that wilderness and on to the Promised Land. He had appeared to them as a pillar of cloud by day, and as a pillar of fire by night – and all Israel had to do each day to avoid getting off-track, to avoid getting lost and perishing in the wilderness, to stay on the path leading to the Promised Land, all they had to do was to follow wherever God

led them.⁸ And so, in our passage, Jesus announces to the people: *“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”* Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life – Jesus Christ is not only bread and water for our life’s journey through the wilderness of this world, Jesus Christ is also the light we follow so that we will not get off-track, so that we will not get lost and perish, so that we shall arrive safely at our life’s Promised Land, which is nothing less than the eternal Kingdom of God. As God led His people to the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey, so now Jesus leads us to the Promised Land of Eternal Life and Never-ending Joy. *“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”*

This announcement of course, as with the previous two about the Bread of Life and Living Water, sets the Pharisees’ teeth on edge, and they confront Him with hostility. But through His debate with them, we are made able to learn more specifically what it means, how it is, that Jesus is our light, the light leading us through the wilderness of this life into the Promised Land of His Kingdom. First off, the Pharisees tell Him that, according to Jewish law and custom, you have to have two witnesses before your testimony can be believed – and that Jesus has only Himself as a witness to such an absurd statement. Jesus answers them that He does indeed have a second witness – His Heavenly Father, the One who sent Him to be the light of the world. This dispute runs on for a few verses, verses thirteen to twenty to be precise – but the key verse is verse nineteen. Jesus says to them, *“You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also.”* If you knew me, you would know my Father also – meaning that in the light of Jesus Christ, we see who God is, we see what our God is like, and we see exactly what is the will and purpose of God towards us and towards His creation. In Jesus Christ we see not only the nature of the One who has given us our life, but His purpose for our lives. In Jesus Christ, the light of the world, we see – as John puts it elsewhere – that *“God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all.”*⁹

Meaning that the One who made us, the One who would lead us, intends only good towards us. That to follow Him is never to be led into darkness, never to be led into a dead end, never to be led into anywhere other than beside still waters and down into green pastures, in paths of right and righteousness which will restore our souls. And even should we be led through the very valley of the shadow of death, we can trust and be not afraid that we are being led on in goodness and mercy towards that house where we shall dwell with Him forever.¹⁰ In Jesus Christ, the light of the world, we see that our God only wants to bless and to heal, only wants to forgive and to amend, only wants to set free from the darkness of our sin and sorrow and to lead us safely home. In Jesus Christ, the light shining in and upon us, we see that our God loves us, desires us, cherishes us, redeems us – and that if we will just follow Him in this life, we will find ourselves led into perfect joy and peace in the next.

Which then leads to the next topic of dispute with the Pharisees, verses twenty-one to twenty-seven. Jesus announces to the Pharisees that there is, nonetheless, a limited window for us to choose to follow Him – and that it really can be too late if we fail to make that choice. He tells the Pharisees that before long He will be going away – referring to His cross, resurrection, and ascension – and that they are, in the present moment, in their present rejecting of Him, in danger of dying in their sins, unable to follow Him where He is going. They, of course, misunderstand Him. And He explains to them why they are unable to understand Him: *“You are from below; I*

am from above. You are of the world; I'm not of this world." He is the light of the world – but they are choosing to reject the light which has come to them from above, choosing instead to continue to dwell in the land of deep darkness. Echoing something He said earlier, back in John 3 – right after John 3:16 in fact: *"And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil."*¹¹

So that Jesus is the light of the world means not only that He reveals the light of God's true nature and purpose to us, but also that His light reveals to us the darkness of this world – and most especially the darkness which dwells in every human heart. By His light, we see, suddenly illumined, the darkness in ourselves. We see our sinfulness, our selfishness, our brokenness, our weakness and futility. We see all the ways in which our lives fall short of the glory of God. We see that when the leader we are following through life is nothing but our own thoughts and desires, then we have a fool without a clue for a leader. And we see that when we let this world, the culture around us, lead us concerning what we should do and be and desire in our lives – when we let the world around us dictate to us the terms, conditions, and goals of our existence – then we have chosen to follow nothing more than the pooled ignorance of those who walk in darkness.

But that Jesus Christ is the light coming into our darkness also means that can now make a choice, that we are now given by Him the gift of a choice – to choose to follow His light instead of the darkness without and within us. To choose to follow Him into the life He wants for us to have, created us in His goodness to possess. The light of Jesus Christ is, therefore, a wake-up call enabling us to see things as they really are, to see ourselves and this world around us as they really are. And so to choose the light, to choose life, to choose Him – and so to be led out of our own wilderness into the Promised Land of His mercy, love, and peace. In Jesus Christ, the light of the world, we can actually begin living a different life, a different quality of life – a life which satisfies instead of depletes.

Frederick Buechner wrote this – and I find it so beautiful, so true, so fitting for this passage that I feel compelled to share it with you:

The world floods in on all of us. The world can be kind, and it can be cruel. It can be beautiful, and it can be appalling. It can give us good reason to hope and good reason to give up all hope. It can strengthen our faith in a loving God, and it can decimate our faith. In our lives in the world, the temptation is always to go where the world takes us, to drift with whatever current happens to be running strongest. When good things happen, we rise to heaven; when bad things happen, we descend to hell. When the world strikes out at us, we strike back, and when one way or another the world blesses us, our spirits soar. I know this to be true of no one as well as I know it to be true of myself. I know how just the weather can affect my whole state of mind for good or ill, how just getting stuck in a traffic jam can ruin an afternoon that in every other way is so beautiful that it dazzles the heart. We are in constant danger of being not actors in the drama of our own lives but reactors. The fragmentary nature of our experience shatters us into fragments.

Instead of being whole, most of the time we are in pieces, and we see the world in pieces, full of darkness at one moment and full of light the next.

It is in Jesus, of course, and in the people whose lives have been deeply touched by Jesus, and in ourselves at those moments when we also are deeply touched by him, that we see another way of being human in this world, which is the way of wholeness. When we glimpse that wholeness in others, we recognize it immediately for what it is, and the reason we recognize it, I believe, is that no matter how much the world shatters us to pieces, we carry inside us a vision of wholeness that we sense is our true home and that beckons to us.¹²

“I am the light of the world,” says Jesus. “Whoever follows me – whoever **follows me!** – whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” It is a choice to step away from following the present darkness of this world, and to begin to follow Jesus. No one ever drifts into discipleship; a choice must be made! And not once, but daily, hourly, even moment by moment – we choose to follow Jesus to live the way He tells us to live. Because whoever follows Him walks not in darkness, but in the light of life being made whole, being made good, being made eternal.

And one last thing Jesus says here. Should we falter in our following – which we all do again and again – should we someone allow ourselves to lose sight of His leading and slip back into the shades of darkness – off-track, lost, and lone – all we have to do is look anew upon Him upon His cross. To remember Him upon His cross – because that is where our journey begins. His cross is our North Star, our benchmark, our way-finder. We can look again upon His cross and so He will find us again, and lead us who have gotten off-track, lost, and lone back to where we are meant to be on our journey. That is what He says to the Pharisees at the end of His dispute with them, verses twenty-eight through thirty. They still understand nothing of what He is saying to them, still are clinging to the darkness they know instead of reaching for the light which best knows them. Jesus says to them, “*When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he . . .*” Then you will know, or know anew and so be found anew, that I am He. That I, says Jesus, I am the One to follow. Whenever we get off-track, lost, and lone while trying to follow Jesus, all we have to do is remember and look to Him upon His cross. Because it is there at His cross that we are found, there where we are claimed, there where we are redeemed from the darkness.

A little story to illustrate this. Hilary Holladay, a professor of English at the University of Massachusetts, tells of the commencement speech she heard on the occasion of her graduation from the University of Virginia. The commencement speaker was the then Governor of Virginia, Chuck Robb. But he is not actually the one who ended up giving the commencement address Holladay is referring to. What happened was this: the graduation was being held out on the lawn past Jefferson’s great Rotunda. But no sooner had the commencement ceremony gotten underway than an unexpected rain began to fall – sprinkling at first, but gradually increasing. By the time Gov. Robb was to speak, the rain had become something more like a downpour. So Gov. Robb won the enduring gratitude of the Class of ’83 by rising to the podium and announcing that under the circumstances he would forego his speech. He received a standing ovation.

The ceremony concluded, the graduates left their seats and began searching for family members beneath the sea of umbrellas around them. Holladay says that her mother saw her first and, very uncharacteristically of her, called out to her daughter in a loud voice from a good ways across that great lawn. She called out to her daughter, “*Do you have any idea how much we love you?*” Holladay writes:

*So I didn't hear an official commencement speech when I graduated from college, and, as it turned out, I didn't attend the ceremonies when I completed graduate school. But I did hear a speech of sorts that day in 1983. My mother had said something I have never forgotten.*¹³

“*Do you have any idea how much we love you?*”

“*When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He . . .*” – the One who loves us more than you and I could ever fathom. When we look upon the cross of Jesus, we hear Him speaking words that commence in us a new life, which can renew in us that following after Him into the light of new life. For what we hear Him saying upon the cross is this: “Do you have any idea how much I love you? Just look and see.” And suddenly, by the assurance of that love, by the power and goodness and grace and glory of that love, we can’t help but want to follow Him wherever He leads us. The One who is the light of life.

¹ Genesis 1:3.

² Isaiah 9:2.

³ John 1:4-5, 9.

⁴ Exodus 16.

⁵ John 6:27.

⁶ Exodus 17:1-7.

⁷ John 7:37-38.

⁸ Exodus 13:21-22.

⁹ I John 1:5.

¹⁰ Psalm 23.

¹¹ John 3:19.

¹² Frederick Buechner, *The Longing for Home* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), pp. 109-110.

¹³ Hilary Holladay, “Mom Trumped Pomp and Circumstance,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 6, 2005.