

I Am: The Light of the World by Holly C. W. Aastuen  
March 8, 2015 John 8:12

I was visiting a friend the other day and as we entered the living room she said, "Please excuse the pillow on the end table there. I was using it for my afternoon nap." She explained that she likes sleeping on the floor in the spot of sun that was streaming through her window and warming the carpeted floor.

I was reminded of how my father, on many a winter Saturday or Sunday afternoon, would find a place on the dining room floor to lie down and take a nap in the warmth of the sun.

Today's sermon is the third of a series of sermons on the I Am sayings of Jesus. First we talked about Moses' encounter with God in the burning bush and last week we talked about Jesus' saying "I am the bread of life." This week we are talking about Jesus' proclamation "I am the light of the world."

To give you a little of the background of Jesus saying this, let me tell you that it is likely that Jesus made this statement in the middle of the Festival of Tabernacles, also known as the Festival of Booths. It is observed in the fall as a celebration of the fall harvest, but it was originally established as a remembrance of the huts the people of Israel lived in during their 40 year sojourn in the desert after the exodus from Egypt.

You and I know about this harvest festival of thanksgiving because our Jewish neighbors sometimes put temporary shelters in their front yard or driveway during this festival. It is a reminder to the people that they are on a journey, that life is temporary, that there is no arrival until we reach our final destination with God. You can see dozens of these temporary shelters in the area of St. Louis Park north of City Hall during this Fall festival.

On the first evening of the Festival of Tabernacles in Jerusalem, there was a ceremony called The Illumination of the Temple. The Court of the Women had at its center four great candelabras. When it became dark, the candelabras were lit and it was said they sent such a blaze of light throughout Jerusalem that every courtyard was lit up with their brilliance. The festival continued way into the night and till the next morning as the people danced before God and sang psalms of praise and thanksgiving.

Jesus' saying he is the light of the world soon after this celebration is as if he is saying "You have seen the great light of the Illumination of the Temple, but there is a light that is even greater than that and lasts not just one night but forever."

Jesus promised that those who follow him will walk, not in darkness but will have the light of life.

And not only did he say he was the light of the world, he also proclaimed that we are the light of the world. His words are quoted in Matthew, chapter 5, right in the middle of his Sermon on the Mount. He says: "You are the light of the world...No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all the

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house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to God in heaven."

Jesus is the light of the world. You are the light of the world. Both statements are true. Both are intended to point the way to God.

Unfortunately, these words in Matthew are too often twisted to be a sort of admonition to be a better Christian. Often these words of Jesus are couched as a pep talk: "Be light!" But that's not what Jesus said. He said, "You are light! Go ahead and shine!"

I'm reminded of that quote by Marianne Williamson:

*Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, "Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?" Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world... We are all meant to shine... We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us... And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.*

Our being light encourages others to be light.

We don't need to have our act together before we shine God's light. Even in our brokenness we can be a light of hope and share God's love with others. Jesus let us know it is okay to be vulnerable. He invites us to come out of ourselves, to forsake our human certainties and make ourselves a gift of unbounded love. Sometimes the most luminous artists are the ones who are broken and broken-hearted and out of their brokenness they shine light—the light of courage, the light of strength, the light of hope.

So we are called to be light, to illuminate the dark places. Shine with everything we've got. And as we shine, we are to let our light shine before others, not keep it to ourselves.

Light is an interesting thing. If light is shined in the midst of light, like a flashlight on a bright sunny day, there doesn't seem to be much power in the flashlight. But when we take that same flashlight and shine it in the night, then it has the power to make our way clear, the power to get us where we need to go.

There was a young girl who was afraid of the dark. Late one evening her father asked her to go out to the barn to get some tools. She didn't want to go, but her father gave her a flashlight to help light the way. She stood at the bottom step of the porch and her father asked, "How far can you see, honey?"

"I can see the trunk of the oak tree," she responded.

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The father said, "Good. Then go to the oak tree." When she reached the oak tree he asked, "How far can you see now?"

The girl replied that she could see the lilac bushes. The father said, "Go to the bushes."

As the girl reached the bushes the father asked again, "How far can you see now?" This time the girl said she could see the hen house and then finally the barn. The father, still watching her from the porch told her to go to the barn.

Light illuminates the road ahead and guides you step by step down the path you need to take.

Light also needs to be turned on to let us see. What illumines your life, brightens your faith? What is it that you are doing to sustain the God light within so that it can shine without? If all your doing is being fed by others and passively taking it in, you will grow flabby in your faith. You need to exercise your faith by turning on—turning on to scripture, turning on to prayer, turning on to meditation, turning on to serving others—whatever brightens your light.

I was doing some research for this sermon when I came upon this picture from several years ago.

It's a picture of John Unger from Bayfield, Wisconsin, who took his beloved dog Schoep into Lake Superior to help ease the dog's arthritis pain. The picture went viral and ever since then he's gotten thousands of cards and letters from people all over the world. That was in 2012. In July of 2013 Schoep died and Unger was devastated. Having loved and cared for Schoep for 20 years he wasn't sure he would be emotionally able to adopt another dog again.

Now, a year and a half after Schoep's death, Unger has decided to adopt again. "It was really tough after Schoep left," he said. "I didn't know what to do with my time. I was re-learning how to live and once I learned that, and once I got through the toughness of his loss, that's when I started searching again."

He credits Schoep for saving his life as he battled depression and even contemplated suicide one night when the two were out in Lake Superior. But he looked at Schoep's face and changed his mind. "He saved me that night, and I could only do my very best for him after that," Unger said.

Now John Unger has a new dog named Bear and in their first few weeks together they have become close companions to one another. Each has opened their heart to another love. And they are being the light to one another, they are brightening the darkness that each one came from.

"Everyone brightens a room," the saying goes, "Some when they enter, and others when they leave."

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I was with a group of my friends a few years back. We were at a clergy event and we were laughing and sharing good stories. The mood suddenly changed when another person walked into the room. I didn't know him, but the others did and though they were cordial to him, the mood had somehow darkened.

He poked fun at a couple of them and they laughed politely, but the jokes he told were thinly veiled put downs that I didn't think were that funny.

When he left a while later, the mood suddenly brightened again.

We all know people who bring darkness with them wherever they go. I pray that we will bring light with us wherever we go.

Jesus is the light of the world. We are the light of the world. Like flowers that bloom in the light of the sun, our lives grow with grace and beauty in the light of Jesus.

The next time you see the sunshine or even take an afternoon nap in the sun, remember that Jesus is light and we are light and we are called to shine.

Shine your light so that they may see your good works and glorify God in heaven. That's what we are called to do. Shine in the darkness. Bring hope to a dark and doubting world. Shine with God's light so that others may see the Way of God and see their way through.