

“Light Up!”

A sermon in the Lenten series

“Listen Up!”—Following Jesus More Closely”

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- Matthew 5:14-16 ¹⁴“You are like light for the whole world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bowl; instead it is put on the lampstand, where it gives light for everyone in the house. ¹⁶In the same way your light must shine before people, so that they will see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven. (GNT)
- Isaiah 9:2-3a, 6-7 The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in a pitch-dark land, light has dawned. ³You have made the nation great; you have increased its joy. ⁶A child is born to us, a son is given to us, and authority will be on his shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷There will be vast authority and endless peace for David’s throne and for his kingdom, establishing and sustaining it with justice and righteousness now and forever. The zeal of the Lord of heavenly forces will do this. (CEB)
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: As believers we are called to employ our attitudes and our actions and our speech to light up the world so all have the chance to see that God is good.

The year was 1941. Scientists at Columbia University wanted to answer the question, “What’s the minimum amount of light needed in order for humans to perceive that they have seen something?” They conducted controlled experiments and came up with “reliable measurement[s] of the ‘absolute threshold’ of vision – the minimum number of photons that must strike our retinas in order to elicit an awareness of visual perception.” Their answer: between 5 and 14 photons. What’s that mean? It means that if the earth’s surface was flat instead of curved, on a dark night the average person would be able to see the flickering flame of a single candle... from a distance of about 30 miles.¹ Even the slightest glimmer of light has the power to penetrate vast, deep darkness.

During this season of Lent we’ve been exploring the possibilities of what it could mean for us to follow Jesus more actively. Our worship theme for Lent this year is “Listen Up!” I based that on the observation that throughout the gospels Jesus was always “up” to something; he was always doing *something*: walking or resting or preaching or praying or eating or healing or teaching or sailing or welcoming or warning or encouraging... you get the idea.

I’ll admit that this week’s theme – “Light Up” could be misunderstood. Anyone old enough to remember television before 1971 will recall that cigarette commercials used to run on TV, often with the invitation to “Light up.” In both the original and recent remake of the movie “Ghostbusters,” the team activated their ghost-busting proton packs with the command to “light ‘em up.”

But let’s focus on how the Bible makes reference to light. We’re familiar with many of those references.

One reference I’ve known since I was a child but at the time didn’t connect it with the Bible. In our house on Sunday mornings growing up in Chicago, either the radio was tuned to a

¹ “How Far Can the Human Eye See?” by Natalie Wolchover, May 7, 2012 02:00 p.m. ET at <http://www.livescience.com/33895-human-eye.html>, accessed 3/22/2017

station playing pipe organ music, or the television was tuned to a locally-produced religious program called "Lamp Unto My Feet." I never actually watched the program because it wasn't exciting... but I did like to watch the opening image showing a flickering flame coming from the end of one of those Middle Eastern oil lamp shaped like a gravy boat. It wasn't until years later that I discovered that the program title "Lamp Unto My Feet" was from Psalm 119:105 which says, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path." Scripture illuminates our walk with God. Scripture lights our way.

Another biblical reference to light is found in the opening verse of Psalm 27 where the certainty of God's strength and protection is compared to the comforting assurance provided by light. It declares, "The Lord is my light and salvation. Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid?"²

Yet another reference to light was one we heard this morning from a passage we're accustomed to hearing during Advent. The prophet Isaiah announces an encouraging assurance to "the people who walked in darkness," that is, the people who wondered where God was in their lives and where they were in God's plan. Isaiah foresaw that they will "have seen a great light," someone to become a guiding beacon to light their way.

Turning to the New Testament, John's gospel records Jesus as making a bold declaration to the religious traditionalists. "I am the light of the world," he said. "Whoever follows me will have the light of life and will never walk in darkness."³ Jesus is leading the way, lighting up the way, showing us where to go in order to follow in his footsteps, and as long as we follow we'll "never walk in darkness."

Then this morning's Gospel selection was a familiar excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount. It bears a slight similarity to the passage from John's gospel, but the difference is key. In Matthew's gospel Jesus is recorded as saying not "I" but "You are the light of the world." Then he explains the significance.

¹⁴ "You are like light for the whole world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵ No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bowl; instead it is put on the lampstand, where it gives light for everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way your light must shine before people, so that they will see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven."⁴

If the crowd spread out before him on the hillside had any trouble grasping what Jesus possibly could have meant in telling them, "You are like light for the whole world...", he gave them a forehead-slapping example: *Would you light a lamp, but then put a bucket over it? If we were on that hillside, Jesus might have asked us:*

- If you're looking for something, would you turn on a flashlight then cover it with your hand?
- Would you turn on the car's air-conditioning and then roll down the windows?
- Would you prepare and cook a delicious and nutritious meal and then throw it out so you don't risk putting on weight?
- Would you go on a sight-seeing trip, but spend the entire time with your nose buried in a book?

No. If you're a light, your purpose is to shine! Jesus the Son of God came into our lives to light up the way for us to find and follow God's will. What then? Picture a Christmas Eve service: here and at many churches on Christmas Eve we light a candle, then take the flame and

² Psalm 27:1 KJV

³ John 8:12 GNT

⁴ Matthew 5:14-16 GNT

pass it one-by-one until the whole room is filled with light. The light of the world Jesus Christ ignites us. He infuses us with the light of his love and mercy. He urges us to continue carrying that light into the world on his behalf...

- by what we say to loved ones and to strangers,
- by the respect we show to people of influence and people of humble standing,
- by the content and tone of what we post on social media.

We're to light up every place. Why? So that the people of the world will see the good work that we are doing. Then, seeing the goodness within us is inspired by God, they, too, will give thanks to the God of Heaven and Earth.

God empowers us to illumine, to radiate, to glow, to light up the way for others. We're to take the light of compassion that we have from Jesus and light up a way for people who search for something or someone...

- offering strength in their time of weakness...
- offering hope in the midst of despair...
- offering courage when the pressures of life overwhelm...
- offering forgiveness when the weight of one's sin smothers one's sense of self-worth.

As believers we are called to employ our attitudes and our actions and our speech to light up the world so all have the chance to see that God is good. Why would we ever hide our light? Why would we ever withhold from our neighbors and family and community the light of love that God has placed within us through Jesus the Son?

Let us pray. *Holy God, in Jesus you have confirmed that you are our light and our salvation, the strength of our lives: Help us be more attentive to how we can allow the light of your love to shine through what we do, and even what we say. Amen.*