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John 8:12-20; Exodus 13:17-22

## THE 'I AM' STATEMENTS: I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

Last week a massive power failure hit Argentina and Uruguay, plunging tens of millions of people into utter darkness. Local elections in some Argentine cities went ahead as scheduled with voters using the flashlights on their cell phones to see their ballots. The cause of the power failure was not yet known.

When the power goes out, one of the most pressing issues is, "how will I see?" Without light, those of us dependent upon our sight become helpless.

Light is a common biblical theme. All throughout the Bible we find the metaphor of light used in reference to God and contrasted with the circumstances of darkness. In fact, the Bible both begins and ends with the contrast between light and darkness. In the book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible, we are told that darkness covered the earth until the moment when God spoke and said, "Let there be light." Light was the first thing God called into existence.

Then, the very last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, ends with a description of a new heaven and a new earth in which "there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light."

The Old Testament prophets often drew on the light metaphor when speaking about humanity's need for God. In a favorite passage we read each Christmas, Isaiah states, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light."

The writer of the Gospel of John wants us readers to understand Jesus to be that light. John begins his gospel account by referring to Jesus as "the light that shines in the darkness and

the darkness did not overcome it." So, then, we the readers are prepared when later in the Gospel of John, we hear Jesus himself state, "I am the light of the world."

As we explored last Sunday, when Jesus uses that phrase, "I am" the light of the world, or the bread of life or the true vine or the good shepherd, when Jesus uses these phrases beginning with the words, "I am," throughout the Gospel of John, he is intentionally drawing people's memories to the holy encounter God had with Moses in the burning bush. That was the moment when God states God's name as: I AM WHO I AM. That phrase, "I Am" indicates a permanent state of existence, a presence that always is there.

The writer of John's gospel clearly wants us to associate Jesus with the Great I Am of God. At the beginning of his Gospel, John refers to Jesus as the Word and states, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." The same eternal permanence found in the Great I Am of the burning bush is found in Jesus.

There is also another connection to the Moses story found in Jesus' declaration of "I am the light of the world." When Jesus makes this statement he is in Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles. This feast commemorated the Hebrew people's journey through the wilderness after Moses led them from slavery in Egypt. For forty years the people wandered in the wilderness, living an impermanent life in tents, before they finally settled in the Promised Land. But God was present with them throughout all the trials and difficulties of those years. And one of those ways that God helped them was to guide them with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of light by night so the people could see where they were going.

Jesus is in town for this special festival of remembrance of God's faithfulness to their ancestors in the wilderness wanderings with Moses. This event is the context for when Jesus declares, "I am the light of the world." Most likely the night Jesus made this statement was on

the night of the Grand Illumination, when the courtyard of the Temple was lined with giant torches, commemorating the great pillar of light that brightened the night so their ancestors could see where they were going. The night of the Grand Illumination was a tremendous spectacle and time of celebration. And in this context, Jesus states, "I am the light of the world." You see, Jesus becomes the new pillar of light to guide us.

And the reason we need a pillar of light is because we also are on a journey and need guidance through the darkness.

You know that classic question children are prone to ask 5 minutes into a long car journey. "Are we there yet?" We laugh when children ask this question because we know that there is a lot more to the journey. Life itself is a journey and yet some of us live and behave as if we had arrived. However the idea of arrival is a myth. We never fully arrive in this life. There is always more ways to grow, more things to learn, more insights to gain. There is always more to the journey of life to experience, savor, cherish. When did we start believing or behaving as if we had arrived? Was it when we graduated? Or got married? Or had kids? Or bought a house? When did we start acting as if we had arrived at the final destination of life? At what point did our opinions and beliefs become hardened? When did we no longer have anything to learn spiritually? Some studies indicate that most people stop growing spiritually around the age of 13. Arrested development at age 13! We excuse this kind of mentality with statements like, "well, she's set in her ways, " or "you can't teach an old dog new tricks." As people of faith, we regard our ultimate destination to be with God, to walk in God's ways, and to be one with God. Which makes the idea of arrival a myth. Life is a journey. And like all journeys, we need guidance. Jesus is the light that will guide us.

Perhaps this is why God told the Hebrew people to celebrate this Festival of Tabernacles, so that when they finally reached the Promised Land and settled into permanent homes and got used to living in one place, they would not forget and think, "Ahh, we've arrived." The Festival would remind them of their wandering days in the wilderness, that life is always a pilgrimage, and that they always stand in need of God's guidance.

Just like we always stand in need of God's guidance. To claim that "Jesus is the light of the world," means that there is no point in this life when we reach a final destination physically, emotionally, spiritually. We are on a pilgrimage and we need God's light to know where to go. This is good news for us when we find ourselves at a place in life that is painful, challenging, confusing. We are reminded that this stopping place is not our final destination.

But claiming that "Jesus is the light of the world" also poses a challenge to us. It compels us to follow that light. It compels us to leave what may be comfortable and to follow where God is leading us. Just like the pillar of light lit a way, a path, Jesus lights a way and a path for us. The way of Jesus includes loving enemies, caring about the well being of people we don't like. Are we willing to follow that light? The way of Jesus includes striving to forgive people, working to reconcile, bearing with one another, not just walking away from relationships in anger. Are we willing to follow that light? The way of Jesus sees the humanity in every person and treats others with dignity regardless of who they are, their political affiliation, their documentation, their income. Are we willing to follow that light? The way of Jesus can often challenge our established beliefs and opinions about almost everything--about gender and sex and race, about economics, about our relationship with the environment, about who is included and who is excluded, about who gets to hold power. Are we willing to follow that light? The Apostle Paul thought he was doing right when he persecuted and murdered the early followers of

Jesus. But then the light of Christ shone upon him and made him see a new truth. The early Jewish followers of Jesus believed it was right to exclude Gentiles, until the light of Christ shone upon them with a new truth. Captain John Newton believed he was right to use his ships to carry enslaved Africans to distant lands for sale, until the light of Christ shone upon him offering a new truth and inspiring him to write the song, *Amazing Grace*. Governor George Wallace of Alabama believed he was right when in the 1960's he proclaimed, "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation always," and when he blocked the entrance to the University of Alabama so black students couldn't enter, and when he directed state troopers to use billy clubs on non-violent protestors including children--until the light of Christ and personal sufferings opened up to him a new truth.

We need the light of Christ to light our way, to show us the path out of the darkness--even when and especially when we don't realize we are sitting in deep darkness. The light of Christ is intended to lead us onward, not just to illuminate where we are. It shines forth so that our stopping places don't become our staying places. Because there is always more to the journey.