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Light That Illuminates the Way

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In the beginning, God said, let there be light. In the Hebrew it's actually only two words, 'light be'. And in that moment, electromagnetic waves arranging and wavelength over 16 orders of magnitude burst into existence. Potential energy and kinetic energy reservoirs were deposited around the universe to fuel its existence for billions of years. The process of photosynthesis started, radio waves, microwaves, infrared, optical, ultraviolet x rays, and gamma rays all came into existence, all lights. To rule the night he created the moon and the stars; to rule the day he created the sun, and if the sun were a Baskin Robbins shop of 100 billion flavors, our finite senses would be able to taste about five. We're aware of some of the sun's invisible properties. We know that thermal radiation will warm us up and ultraviolet radiation will give us wrinkles, but we've only barely experienced the full extent of the first thing God created. Let there be light. The study of light has baffled scientists for centuries. In the fifth century BC, the Pythagoreans believed that light shot out of the human eye and hit objects and allowed us to see them. Turns out it's actually the opposite; light reflects off the object, enters into our eyes giving us sight. In the 1600's / 1700's Isaac Newton proposed that light was made up of particles and Christian Huygens proposed it was made up of waves; the wave theory won out. 200 years ago, Maxwell introduced his mathematical equations of electromagnetism. After centuries of study, just 200 years ago, we were finally able to come up with a mathematical representation for the very first thing God created. Einstein came on the scene and he actually demonstrated that light acted as both particle and as wave, and he said that that discovery was the only truly revolutionary thing he ever did. Let there be light. It took two words and one moment for light to enter into human history, and it has taken us millennia of time to barely scratch the surface of understanding that first thing that God called into existence. Let there be light and light would be a theme throughout the entire story of God and the exodus as he's leading his people across the wilderness into the promised land, he leaves them with a pillar of a cloud by day and fire by night.

In Numbers six, the priestly blessing would say, may the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord's face shine upon you. The light of his face was a blessing on his people. The psalmist would declare, you light a lamp for me, the Lord my God lights up my darkness and send out your light and your truth, let them guide me and your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.

In 700 B.C. Israel was in a very dark time in its history. For that moment there was actually a good king on the throne, but they had already come through dozens of years of oppressive kings and self-serving religious leaders. The poor were oppressed. There was always danger looming on the horizon as armies of two different empires threatened to invade. And in that dark time a prophet named Isaiah arose from their midst and he looked forward to a day when freedom was coming and he pronounced that there would be a moment when the people walking in darkness have seen a great light, on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned, 800 years would pass and the darkness would grow. In our Bibles it's only one turn of a page, but for the

people walking in the darkness was 400 years. The prophets had fallen silent. They had lived through a number of empires, invading and receding and oppressing the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks and the Romans. A series of wicked kings, including in one 67 B.C. when Antiochus Epiphanes, would walk in to the Jewish Temple and walk into the most holy place and on the altar of the holy of holies sacrifice a pig to the god, Zeus. It's about a man named King Herod, who in the first century B.C. would come to the throne of the Jewish people; he wasn't Jewish himself, and his ego manifests itself in great building projects. In fact, on a sandy beach with no deep harbor, he would build the second largest harbor in the Roman world at Caesarea. And the dry wilderness of the Dead Sea region he would build a fantastic fortress known as Masada in a place where annual rainfall was about an inch and a half a year, he would build a fortress that housed three bath houses, a giant swimming pool, impressive guards and cisterns filled with water for the people who live there. An egotistical and maniacal king, an oppressive and occupying Roman army and a people walking in darkness. When in one moment Isaiah's prophecy would come to pass. It's through the silence the voice of God would be heard again in the cry of a baby. And through the darkness, a light would shine above his birthplace to lead men from the east to come to the place and worship him; God wrapped in the skin of his own creation, subjecting himself to the care of his own creation, Jesus was born. He would declare himself to be the light of the world.

Many years later, one of his oldest followers, a man named John, would write of his birth. And in John one verse four and five, he would say...

"⁴In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

The light of Jesus brought community to the marginalized and healing to the sick. It brought hospitality to the foreigner. It brought prominence to women and food to the hungry and deliverance to the oppressed. It brought legs to the lame, to a dead Lazarus it said, get up out of the grave and walk, to the blind the light of the world gave sight. One of my favorite stories is in John nine when Jesus is walking around with his disciples and they encounter a man who was born blind and the disciples asked Jesus, what is the reason that this man is born blind is it because of his sins or is it because of the sin of his parents? And Jesus said, it's neither. This man was born blind to display my glory. And we read in John nine, verse six...

"The Jesus spit on the ground, made mud with the saliva, and smoothed the mud over the blind man's eyes. ⁷Then Jesus spit on the ground, made mud with the saliva and smooth the mud over the blind man's eyes. He told him, go wash in the Pool of Siloam. The man went and washed and came back seeing."

Now, if this was the Biblical passage in your small group for this week, there are a number of directions you can go. There are so many interesting things you can talk about. You can talk about the creative ways in which Jesus decides to display his glory. You can notice and acknowledge and talk about the idea that Jesus never seems to heal in the same way twice. You can laugh about the fact that the disciples are always asking the wrong questions. You could even discuss the first century Rabbinic understanding of sickness and its relationship to sin. Or you could even talk about the neurological phenomenon that we have observed in zebrafish

though never in human beings where apparently the muller glia and this man's retina began to regenerate cone and rod photoreceptors and rewire them to the brain in order to give him vision. But I guess I'm just not that deep because when I read this story, this is the question that plagues me. How many times did Jesus have to spit to make enough mud to cover that man's eyes? I mean, it's not a lot. It's just eyes and he is fully man and fully God, so perhaps in his full divinity, he's able to just give one good spit and let there be mud. But I just have this image in my head when I read this story in my spiritual imagination, I just see the creator, the redeemer, the sustainer of the universe hovered over this dry, cracked, dusty ground of first century Palestine just spitting and spitting and spitting in desperation to restore sight to the blind man. It's the image of the light of the world doing everything in his human power to restore sight, to show this man the way. To that blind man Jesus being the light of the world was not just a cool little phrase. It wasn't just a nice idea, it wasn't just a metaphor to him it was personal and it was practical and it was biological and neurological. Light had been restored to his life.

Now, I don't know your story today. I don't know where you come from. I don't know your background, but some of you are here this weekend and you need the light of the world to restore light to your life and just like that blind man, Jesus is willing to get down into the mess of your life, to restore light. Maybe the way ahead is unclear, maybe your world has grown dark, maybe you walked away from God at some point. Maybe you left the church, maybe you abandoned religion, maybe you'll gave up on faith and there may be a lot of very good reasons why you did so. It may have been doubt, it may have been anger, maybe shame or sin or disappointment or disillusionment, but wherever you are and whatever your story might be, I believe that this season of advent is a great time to come to Jesus or come back to Jesus because his light still shines in the darkness. And just like he did 2000 years ago, he's willing to get down into the mess and the hurt and the pain and the confusion and the disappointment and the disillusionment to restore light and life to your life.

I think there are three things that we can do that help us engage, participate with, cooperate with the light when it shines in our life. You can call them spiritual disciplines, you can call them experiments, you can call them best practices, but I want to talk about three postures and positions and practices we can engage in that allow the light to shine more clearly and illuminate the way ahead of us.

The first one is confession. Let's just start with a fun one, right? Confession, Hebrews 12:1 says,

"Let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us."

Last fall I was at a fall festival with my three year old daughter, well, she was two at the time and we were going through this corn maze and at one point in the corn maze you enter into this building that was pitch black. And Sawyer got scared and so I pick her up and I'm holding her with one arm and with my other arm. I am just trying to find my way ahead. I can't see anything. I can't see my path forward. I have no idea what is in front of me. We stumble through that dark building and eventually stepped back out into the light, when I discover I'd still had my sunglasses on the entire time. The next time I went through that corn maze with some friends, I took my sunglasses off and even though it was still very dark, there was just enough light that I

was able to see my way ahead. I think that's what the writer of Hebrews is talking about when they say to strip off the things that so easily trip us up. See we sometimes think that this idea of confession is this very repressive, terrible, difficult thing and it's really stripping off something to give us freedom to move more easily, to move more quickly. It's taking off the distraction.

James 5:16 says...¹⁶ *Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another so that you may be healed.*"

I think one of the great tragedies we experienced in the Protestant reformation is that we completely threw out this practice of confession. That we came to this place where we as Protestants understood that we don't need to confess to another person for forgiveness. We can confess directly to God for forgiveness, but what we have failed to do and neglected to do is to feel the healing power of confession when we confess to one another. There's something incredibly freeing and healing about confessing to one another. At some point, the church became the last place we wanted to reveal our secrets and our sins and our hurts, our hang ups and our habits. We've got to get back to a place where we realized that the church is not a museum for saints but a hospital for sinners and confess to one another for healing. It's a way that the light shines on our lives and shows us the path forward. When John Wesley started his movement, people would meet together in small groups and he'd give them a list of questions and every week that was their curriculum, they would just go through this list of questions. Listen to some of the questions that John Wesley's first followers would talk about each week...

- Am I consciously or unconsciously creating the impression that I'm better than I really am? In other words, am I a hypocrite?
- Do I pray about the money I spend?
- Is there any one whom I fear, dislike, disown, criticize, hold a resentment toward or disregard? If so, what am I doing about it?
- And there's about 14 more of those kinds of questions.

What if those were the questions that we went over in small group every week? We might have fewer people in small group. We might also find that we're more healed and we walk and more freedom. I pray that NCC is a safe place for confession. I pray that it's a safe place for repentance. Repentance is one of those words we don't talk about often and we don't practice enough. It merely means that when the light shines and shows us the way we stop moving in the direction we were going and turn around and walk in the light. It's about walking in the way of Jesus and when the light shines, we can either resist or we can repent. Let there be light.

I think a second practice that we can engage in to let the light shine is worship and it's because worship redirects our focus. Our eyes and light interact with each other in really weird ways sometimes. Sometimes what we think we see is not really what is there and now we're going to have some fun with this. I'm going to put an optical illusion up on the screen, stare at the x in the middle of the screen. As you stare at the x in the middle of the screen, in your peripheral vision, you will see a green dot chasing the purple dots around the circle. And if you stare at the x long enough, the green dot will eventually erase some of those purple dots in the circle. Anybody see that? Alright, there are actually no green dots. If you shift your focus, you'll find that there's only purple dots and none of the dots ever erase. What you're experiencing is something called

negative retinal after image. See, sometimes your eyes deceive you and what's right in front of you, you can't even see unless you shift your focus. And sometimes it's shifting the focus just a little bit that changes the reality you experience.

Okay, I've got another optical illusion if we've got it up there. Now when you look at this image, you will see one of two things immediately. How many of you, the first thing you see is a duck? Raise your hand. Alright, how many of you, the first thing you see as a rabbit, raise your hand. Now that I've mentioned it, how many of you can see the thing that you couldn't see before? How many of you can only see the new thing that I mentioned and not what you saw originally? What we focus on changes the reality that we experience. Worship is a way that we change our focus; it moves our sight just a little bit so that we can see things differently. It allows us to have a 30,000 foot view the way that God views the world. Would we change our focus in worship it allows us to see that he's still on the throne and he is still sovereign. We see grace in the midst of hardship. We see mercy in the midst of mess. There's a really interesting story in the Old Testament where David and his men have been out fighting. They've been out in battle and they come home from battle and when they get home, they find that the Amalekites army has taken all of the women and children and kidnapped them and David's army is about to kill him. But in that moment, David did not come up with a plan for defense, he did not put into place a plan of action, he didn't stand up and make a speech. The scripture says he went off by himself and encouraged himself in the Lord. David knew that worship was the thing that would change the perspective, which would change the reality that he lived in. When the people of God were facing an impenetrable wall at Jericho, they worshiped anyway. When Habakkuk prayed for revival and God said, you're going to get invasion, he worshiped anyway. When Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are standing in a fiery furnace they worshiped anyway. When Paul and Silas were in chains in prison, they worshiped anyway and it changed the reality that they lived in. In the midst of hardship and pain and suffering and confusion worship anyway. As Pastor Joel talked about last weekend; when we look at the bigness of our circumstances, it can be overwhelming, but if we change our focus instead to the bigness of God our hardships are dwarfed in the midst of it, our temporal problems seem to disappear in the light of his eternal radiance. We can either worry or we can worship.

I think the third practice we can engage in is the scripture. Psalm 119:105 says...

"Your word is a lamp to guide my feet and a light for my path."

See these writings that we call the Bible; its 66 books written by 40 authors over about 1400 years in three languages across three continents, and it tells one seamless story of a passionate God on a relentless pursuit of his people. It begins with God and it ends with God and we find our story somewhere in the middle. If we understand the God of this story, then we come to understand that we were created by someone bigger than us for a story larger than our own. We realize it's a story of a creator who watches his creation fall apart and he steps right in the middle of it to fix it. It's about a father who waits for his child and runs to his child when he comes home. It's about a king who fights battles on behalf of his people. The word of God illuminates the way of God, not because it's some big giant, magical answer book for all questions in life, not because it's some divine FAQ, not because it gives us every answer to every question we might have in the universe. It lights the way of God because it tells us who God is and what he's like.

See, I think sometimes when we open scripture, we come to it and we open it up and the first question we ask is, well, what am I supposed to do? And I think the first question we should ask is God, who are you and what are you like, and that illuminates the way ahead. Let there be light. His light shines through his word and as his word saturates our heart it illuminates the world around us.

And here's the deal; God is not afraid of your questions. Why does a good God allow bad things to happen to good people? Why is there suffering in the world? Where does evil come from? God is big enough and strong enough to handle those questions. Bring your questions to him. Bring your doubts to him. I actually think doubt can be a powerful catalyst to a more resilient faith when we allow our doubt to drive us deeper into his word and deeper into his presence. I think one of the most powerful prayers in scripture is Lord, I believe, help my unbelief. I believe, but there's this little side of me that just can't quite get there. Would you help it to get there? There's a difference between asking God about his actions and accusing him of actions. Doubt merely asks and it leans in and he leans forward and our doubt can propel us to the light. Let there be light. We can repent or we can resist. We can worship or we can worry. We can pursue the story of God or we can pursue a story of our own making. Walk in the way of light.

This time of Christmas is often called the most wonderful time of the year. For some of us, it's actually the worst time of the year. For some of you, Christmas is a time of loss and disappointment. Christmas is a reminder of the words that can't be taken back and the wounds that still bleed. Christmas might be that dark time where you have to see the uncle that you can't face, the mom that you can't love, the siblings that you can't respect, the fruit cake you just can't eat. Because along with the gift of Christmas, comes the grit of life. For me this year, it will be an empty seat at the table. I think sometimes Christmas is difficult because it takes the toughest things in life, puts them around the same table in a very compressed amount of time and it becomes a pressure cooker. And it at Christmas there's this time that magnifies and highlights everything; the circumstances you can't navigate, the problems you can't solve, the people you can't please and the expectations you can't meet. And if that's the kind of darkness that you're walking into in this season just remember that Christmas isn't the most wonderful time of the year because of what is happening around us now, but because of what happened 2000 years ago. When the light of the world came and in him was life and his life was the light of all mankind and the light shines in the darkness and the darkness still has yet to overcome it. It's the time when the voice of God was heard once again in the cry of a baby and the darkness was pierced with the light of the world. The light of the world was not a religion, it was not a moral code, it was not a doctrine, it was a person, it was Jesus Christ. And darkness has still not overcome his light. Caesar couldn't overcome it, Herod couldn't overcome it, Pilot could not overcome it, Nero could not overcome it, the grave could not overcome it, and the circumstances in our lives will not overcome it. Let there be light in your life this Christmas.

Father, I thank you today that your word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. We thank you that your presence 2000 years ago, pierced through very dark world and the darkness of our world still today does not overcome your light, your grace, your peace, your joy. God, I pray today that we would see your light, that it would illuminate the way ahead, that it would warm our souls and our hearts. God, for anyone here that needs the light to shine specifically in the

darkness of their life, I pray that you would open their eyes to see it, to see you. In Jesus' name.
Amen.

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