

## *Longing for the Light*

John 8:12

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For a moment, I want to double down just a little bit on what PD shared earlier. Our desire in this series is to invite the church here at CPC and whoever is joining us via our livestream back into what it means for the church to celebrate advent. It isn't a time of year where we simply try to drag everything that we do on Christmas day and afterward all into the front that is advent. Christmas is a time of celebration where we remember and celebrate on this side of the resurrection that Emmanuel, God with us in the incarnation, has taken place. But as with the weeks and months and years that preceded Christ's first coming, it is a remembrance that we, too, find ourselves in a position of longing for the light. We are longing and wanting the Lord to come in the midst of our dark place which is why the series is titled *The Light in Dark Places*.

We thought it would be appropriate for us to begin this season of advent, of longing and hoping, of doing two things. On the one hand, we rejoice that we now sit on this side of the resurrection. We already have the answer and the promises of Christ in the incarnation, His death upon a cross, and His being raised on the third day as promises which can never be removed. And there are many blessings that flow from the mighty works of the Lord. He has gathered together a people that is His church. His salvation has gone forth, and those who are in need of forgiveness and mercy and reconciliation and salvation receive it. We can experience new life. This is the already. But in our tradition, we don't just celebrate the already. We also look and hope for the not yet. Not until Christ comes again will all things be made right. It is appropriate for us to begin this service of lament in this year 2020.

If you're joining us for the first time, or you've not experienced a service of lament before, this might sound off key. I hope that it does because I think it's precisely an off key tune which we need to hear that invites us to come into this season of advent with a spirit of longing and desire to experience the Lord's light in the midst of our dark experience.

I don't know about you, but I've been among many who have joined the chorus of saying, I can't wait to be done with 2020. I can't wait for 2021. Have you been in that place? I have. This was a hard year and one of the hardest I've experienced in ministry before COVID. You bet I want 2020 to be done. But just as sure as I have joined the chorus of those who have said be done with us, 2020, I remember one of the things that I said on the final day of 2019. I can't wait for 2020.

In a sense, I want this to be over, but I am humbled enough because the Lord has humbled me in it that I don't know what tomorrow will bring. But I long for it to be done, and I long for His light to come into this space and come into our lives in renewed ways. And if you don't know Him, I long for His light to come into your lives for the first time.

This morning, we turn in beginning our series *The Light in Dark Places* to John 8:12 as we seek that the Spirit of God might give us a longing for the light. But before I read this verse, I want you to know where it stands in the letter of John. If you have your Bibles with you and you open there, what you will find is just before this verse is a section of John beginning at John 7:53 through John 8:11, and you will see a little inscription in all of your translations. It says, "The earlier manuscripts do not include John 7:53 to 8:11." What that is referencing is that our earliest most reliable manuscripts do not have this portion of what we find here in this chronology. It doesn't mean that these events didn't happen, but somewhere in the process of copying and so forth, it landed here chronologically. We do not believe, according to the best study and understanding of these manuscripts, that those verses belong there. We believe they happened, but not here.

As we come to verse 12, we understand this comes on the heels of what Jesus previously said as Jerusalem was wrapped up in a season called the feast of tabernacles. And the feast of tabernacles was a

feast where they were to remember the Lord's provision for them in the midst of the wilderness and hear what they would've done in this celebration during this time of 1st century Judaism. They would have gone to the Pool of Siloam, and they would have gathered water there. They would have had many lights to remember the Lord is with us. It is in that place that Jesus responds, and He says, "I will be with you only a little longer, and then I am going to the one who sent me. You will seek me, and you will not find me. Where I am, you cannot come." And He says, "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."

Now, He said these things in the midst of a feast. This would have caused a disruption in the system. Immediately, what would be called into question is how in the world can this one claim these things? But if that were not enough, what Jesus was about to say would be a continuation of a series of statements of which this is the second of seven "I am" statements. But it would be this statement that would be the most controversial and that I hope will serve as a desire for us to have a new longing for the light.

God's word, John 8:12.

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Pray with me.

Father, we now ask by the power of your Holy Spirit, the light of your truth, may it flood our hearts, our minds, our souls that we might long for you in greater ways and long for your light. Help us, O Lord. And help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

As we look at this together this morning, I want us to consider three questions as we work through this brief verse. First, who is He? That is Jesus. What is being claimed here about His identity? Secondly, where are we? Where are we when we read this passage? Where do we imagine that we are in this dialogue? Where would we be? But even a more important question is where are we now? Finally, how is this good?

Who is He? Where are we? And how is this good?

One of the things that is clear here in this statement when Jesus responds to the actions before Him as they are gathered together worshiping the Lord in the midst of Jerusalem is that Jesus takes an opportunity to reveal Himself. But what I want you to understand is that when Jesus reveals Himself, He's doing so by His own understanding of who He is and who He's revealing Himself to be to those around Him. Understand that it is to be received with the utmost of seriousness. And I hope that as you think about this question, I want you to wrestle with this question. Who do you say that He is? It's an important question for us to wrestle with. If you are a believer, I encourage you this is a question we ought to always wrestle with. If you are not a Christian, this is a question which I encourage you to consider.

It's important for us to know that God is up to our wrestling with this question. Even Jesus asks His disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" It's important to hear Jesus's words and words that at first glance might not seem all that controversial because He says, "I am." Understand that this forms a series of seven statements in the gospel of John of the "I am" statements of which this is the second.

Jesus uses this reference of "I am," and what He is doing is not just revealing Himself and who He understands Himself to be, but He's doing it in a way that is absolutely controversial. In so doing, what we need to consider is why is this so controversial? It is because He is directly pointing back to the first time that we hear this phrase in the scriptures which is in Exodus 3.

In Exodus 3, God is lamenting. He sees His people calling out for Him. They are under the enslaved rule of Egypt. Moses is a part of God's people, and He calls Moses out from the burning bush. This startles Moses, of course. As one writer says, it "opens up Moses's most scientific inquiry" of who

God is and who this one is that is speaking to him. God from the bush says to Moses, "Moses, Moses," which is itself a biblical warning that when God calls your name twice, it's time to understand that God is saying, listen up. I'm about to speak to you. Pay attention. Be warned. "Moses, Moses."

He then instructs Moses to take his shoes off for He tells him, "You are on holy ground." Moses does so. And then God speaks to Him and says, I am calling you, and I'm giving to you a mission. It was a mission that Moses thought to be a death wish. If he goes on this mission where he is to declare to the people of God that God is going to rescue them from their enslaved owners and that he's going to speak to Pharaoh that he must let the people of God go, Moses believes that doing so is a death wish at worst and at best would prevent him from living life as he would want to live.

God tells him what He's going to do, but Moses asks the right question. "Who do I say to the people of God who told me these things?" Moses is saying, on what authority? It is here in Exodus 3:14 that God says, "I Am that I Am." And when you go to the people of Israel, that is what you are to say my name is. "I Am that I Am," a title only God could have. It's not that I am because I once was not, or I am because of someone else. I am God, holy, righteous. And to be in my presence requires the removal of your shoes. This is God saying, world, "Moses, Moses," I am the God of the universe. I am the Lord God.

What's interesting is we now see that Jesus in declaring who He is in the gospel of John is not just subtly saying, hey, I'll let you in on a little secret. No. He gets all up into our grill so much so in this phrase by saying, "I am," before we even consider any of the metaphors. In so doing, I believe that all of us were we in that audience understanding what He just said would be willing and fully tempted to pick up the nearest palm size rock and throw it at Him. What He has just done is claimed a name that only God could state and use. In the ears of His hearers, He's just blasphemed God.

Many will look at the scriptures and say to the church, how can you say that Jesus is divine? He never says that. I say that anyone who asks that question, it's a good question. However, I encourage you to look at what Jesus is actually saying when He says, "I am." In drawing on Exodus 3:14, He doesn't need to say, I am the divine Son of God. He's saying, I am God. What the scriptures tell us is that every knee on earth and in heaven, every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord because it is what Jesus claims for Himself.

But what do you say? Do we take seriously, church, that Jesus is claiming divinity, that "I Am that I Am"? He is savior. He is redeemer. He is a shepherd. He is gracious. He is Lord. He is love. He is mercy. He is steadfast and faithful. But first and foremost, it all emanates from who He is. I Am.

Before we look at anything else, we must wrestle with this point. God in Jesus Christ is now in our space, not in a bush, but taking on our flesh and is now saying, I Am. Who do you say, who do you wrestle with, who do you reckon with all that you have? Do we know that we wrestle with the Lord Himself?

Consider the words of C. S. Lewis in his book *Mere Christianity* when he says this regarding the question of who do you say that I am? Lewis says,

"I'm trying here to prevent anyone from saying the really foolish thing that people often say about him. I am ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must never say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things that Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic on the level with a man who says that he is a poached egg, or else he would be the devil of hell. Either this man was and is the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool. You can spit at him, kill him as a demon, or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."

As we come into this advent season, as we call on the name and look for longing for the light that has come and the light that we desire to fully come, we must know that the one to whom we address our prayers, our hearts, our lives, is the one who revealed Himself to be I Am. As we sing our songs, as we pray, as we reflect on His word, we must wrestle with this reality that if we were going to make this up, that if this was some plot by the early church to hook people into something that wasn't real, you would never ever write this kind of book, this kind of letter, this kind of testimony of Jesus and include this self-revelation unless it were true. Not only would Jesus if it were not true deserve to be stoned, but anyone who claimed it of Him would also deserve it. This is a stark and real claim. Who do you say that He is?

If we're going to ask who is He, then it is appropriate to ask who are we? Who are we and where are we? Oftentimes, when I talk to Christians as they read these texts, they imagine themselves as receiving it and in audience, but they don't consider where they would have been in the audience. But when we're honest at the base of our hearts, we, too, would have been ready to stone Jesus. How could He claim to be God, the divine Son of God?

What is interesting is the question where are you now? Why do we think we need this I Am? When we come to advent, when we celebrate the incarnation, where are we?

I know where I am. This has been the hardest year in pastoral ministry, walking with many of you through grief and loss. I feel like in many of our relationships, I miss you. I miss us being together and seeing you greet each other. I feel as though my relationships at times feel like sand falling through my fingers, but I can't keep it in my hands. I'm weary. I'm weary at seeing the tears of others. I'm weary of injustice. I'm weary of division. I'm weary, as one writer says, "of death and disease and despair." I'm weary of drug addiction, and homelessness, and murder, and hate, and war, of orphans. I'm weary of poverty and hunger, thirst and tears, and grief.

I am so weary of these things. If I'm honest with you, in my weariness, I've also felt the callousness of my own heart that wants to separate from it. It has felt at times to be a very dark place, and I feel absolutely powerless to be of help and a source of encouragement and strength.

I'm not saying that to elicit anyone to say, thank you. That's not what I mean. I'm saying this to you as a person and as a pastor in my role. This is how I feel. And I actually think this is precisely where I need to be. Why? It's not because I think the Lord finds it delicious at all that we suffer or wants me to wallow in feeling like I have no strength. But rather I think what He wants is for us to be reminded that we are not in control, but we are in His hands. It is when I am at my weakest and am willing to sit in it that I then find the source of my strength, the Lord Himself.

Where are you? What does advent mean to us anymore beyond all the pressure of the culture and consumerism, putting all of that aside? As my friend and colleague David Cassidy says when considering what advent actually means, "It means that death and disease, despair and drug addiction, homelessness and murder, hate, war, orphanhood, poverty, hunger, thirst, tears, and grief have an expiration date. These are not the original intention for the world and won't see the dawn of the new creation." But I can only begin to hear that if in this advent we can bring it to the Lord. I need to hear and long as one who has hope in the Lord that these things do have an expiration date, that these things will be undone. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "The celebration of advent is possible only to those who are troubled in soul, who know themselves to be poor and imperfect and who look forward to something greater to come."

Friends, we just need one big bath in the Psalms. What we find in the Psalms is how pastor PD led us earlier. Why, Lord? How long, O Lord? Have you turned your back on us, O Lord? No more chastisement, O Lord. That doesn't make our faith brittle. It in fact allows our faith to be strengthened because in acknowledging our hurt and brokenness and the dark places of our own hearts, there and then can we say, may the light of the Lord come. Who is He? I Am. To say that is to also then say, where am I?

And I must tell you, friends, we all sit here in modern life having believed and been drawn to the power of science and the mind. And that is great. It's wonderful, isn't it? We have many blessings

because of science and of the mind. The realities are that the science and mind divorced from the hope of the light leads us to the conclusion that our minds and our abilities have victory over nature. That's what the 20th Century began with. We must rid ourselves of all the religious junk and hypocrisy. All we need is science and industry and human hands, and we will be great. This was going pretty well until our world was wracked with multiple wars, world wars.

And here we are in the 21st Century reminded yet again that while we think we've gotten here, nature rises up and reminds us we are not in control. Please understand I need science. I need the mind. We need these things. But they themselves are not our savior. They will not rid us of our brokenness. In fact, we're reminded that in reality, nature has reared its head, and we come again, Lord, have mercy.

How is this good? If He is the I Am, the holy, the unapproachable, if He is saying and revealing Himself, "I Am," and this is where we are, how is it good? Instead of telling any of His audience to remove their shoes, instead of telling anyone to stay back, the I Am was brought near. And He chose this metaphor, "I am the light."

What does He say in the I Am statements? He says, "I am the bread of life." "I am the light of the world." "I am the door." "I am the good shepherd." "I am the resurrection and life." "I am the way, the truth, and the life." "I am the true vine." When God appeared to Moses, He said, "I Am that I Am. Now I send you forth." Now, God is coming to us again saying, I Am. I've come forth.

John tells us in the words of Jesus, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." This light brings light to dark places, but in so doing it dispels the darkness. Jesus sees us in our sin, sees us in our brokenness, sees the world in its disarray, and yet He comes and is willing to allow His own light to be snuffed out that the light of life might have victory over sin and death so that we can call Him the light of life.

In a beautiful coming together of the Old Testament declaration of "I Am" and the work of Jesus, Paul writes in his second letter to the Corinthians, "For what we proclaim is not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord with ourselves as your servants for Jesus's sake. For God who said, 'Let the light shine out of darkness.'" He's taking his pen, and he's going straight back to creation. He's using the words of God the Father, "Let the light shine out of the darkness," in the creation, and then he takes his apostolic pen and takes his finger and connects the words of God the Father to the work of Christ. This is what he says. "For God who said, 'Let the light shine out of darkness,' has shown in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." The light of the glory of the I Am is now on display that a knowledge which we can receive and understand in the face of Christ.

What is being declared here is the Lord Jesus Christ is saying, "I Am that I Am," but I am the light. And He invites us, every single part of us, into His light. It exposes sin and very uncomfortable truths, but then that light also testifies to itself because the one shining the light, the one who is the light, is the one who in His body and blood dispels all of it. We can bring and wrestle with Him.

What do we learn from the gospel of Matthew when Jesus says, "Come unto me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest, for I am gentle and lowly in heart." Dane Ortlund in his book *Gentle and Lowly* says,

"The Greek word translated 'gentle' here occurs three other times in the New Testament: in the First Beatitude that is the meek will inherit the earth, in the prophecy of Matthew 21:5 that the king Jesus is coming to you humble and mounted on a donkey, and in Peter's encouragement to wives to nurture more than anything else the hidden person of the heart that is of beauty, of gentility, and a quiet spirit. But here when Jesus uses it, what is referred to here is a meek humble gentleness. Jesus is not trigger happy. He's not harsh. He's not reactionary or easily exasperated. He is the most understanding

person in the universe. The posture most natural to Him is not a pointed finger but open arms."

When Jesus says, "I Am that I Am," the light invites us not with a pointed finger but with open arms. "Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Where do you need His light? I don't know this. You do. Is there a part of your heart where you have wrestled, and you don't want His light? This word tells us His light is to be welcomed. What dark situation do you need the light of wisdom? What dark place do you need the comfort and the light of His fellowship? This is the Lord's offering.

As we come this advent, we long for His light. I believe the world, and not the Twitter part of the world or all the craziness that happens on Facebook, both in the church and outside the church is longing for light. Are you? May this advent be a time where our longing for His light is renewed. May He flood our hearts and our souls and our minds with the light of His grace and the welcome of His mercy. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you for your word, for your word is good. Your mercy and goodness are forever and ever. O Lord, we ask now that you would come by your light, and may you greet us and welcome us in the midst of our hurt and our brokenness, our sin, our loneliness, our depression, our anxiety, our joylessness. Lord, with all these things, we are in need desperately of your light. We thank you that it comes as an invitation to enjoy the light of life. We need you, O Lord, and only you can dispel the darkness. Come, Lord Jesus. In your matchless name we pray. Amen.