

The Light Shines in the Darkness

John 1:1-5

12/6/2020

Randy Lovelace

This morning, we continue in this advent series Light in Dark Places. And as a reminder, advent is a season of longing, of desiring, but also of quiet and silence and asking the Lord to reveal the light of His word, the light of His promise, that we await in silence and trust in the Lord that He would prepare us to celebrate the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. As in the time before Christ's coming, Israel found itself in a place of silence wondering why is the Lord seemingly so silent? That's not an unusual position for people to be in. In fact, it's not an unusual place for people like us to be in. This has not been an uncommon cry in difficult circumstances.

As I was preparing this week, I read about an inscription from the second World War that was found on the basement walls of this small place in Cologne, Germany when allied troops were going to release those who had been ensnared and abused by the German Gestapo. They found inscribed on the basement walls of this building the following three sentences. "I believe in the sun even when it is not shining. I believe in love even when not feeling it. I believe in God even when God is silent." As those who awaited the promised Messiah, they waited in silence. We recognize even now as we think about the process of advent as a season of silence, it is completely appropriate to say, O Lord, are you silent?

We are pressed in on with the question do we believe? Do we believe in the sun even when it's buried behind the clouds? And do we believe in love even when we don't necessarily feel it? It's a very human cry.

The season of advent is an opportunity for us to wrestle with this. Even now on this side of the resurrection, we await the promised return of the Lord Jesus Christ who announced prior to His ascension to the right hand of God the Father, I will come again. Where I am going, you cannot come, but I do not leave you as orphans. I give you my Holy Spirit. That Holy Spirit, given to those who believe and given to His church, is a down payment, a promise that He will return. We find ourselves as advent people waiting silently.

But in our waiting, it's appropriate for us to ask in this season do we still believe in the light of life? John invites us to consider this light of life, the word which is shined into the darkness. How do we respond?

Hear now the word of God, John 1:1-5.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

This morning as we look together at this passage, I want you to see the things which were brought to my attention as I studied and prepared to preach this text. There are three simple points: about the light, about the darkness, about us.

At the beginning of his gospel, John gives to us this prologue which does several things simultaneously. On the one hand, this is John teaching and writing about the person of Jesus Christ as in a way of retelling the story of Genesis, of how God created all things out of nothing, out of darkness, but by

the word of His power brought all things into being. In some sense, John is rewriting Genesis in the light of the coming and incarnation, the person and ministry, death and resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ. But in another sense, what John is also doing is inviting everyone who can hear his voice, and I in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ utter the same voice, to consider the invitation, for there are invitations being offered and referred to here. We have to understand first what he says about the light.

What John does in these opening verses is he describes what he's referring to in two ways. First, he refers to it as the word. Secondly, he refers to it as the light, all of which is all bound up in this idea of describing the light. When John refers to the word here, depending on what audience you were when you would've heard this and even now as we hear this, he is appealing to two kinds of audiences. He is appealing to those who have a background and a knowledge of the biblical God and those who have no knowledge of the biblical God when he uses the phrase, "the word."

For those who had no background in belief in the triune God or the monotheistic religion of Israel, they would've understood "logoi" as being this, the central organizing entity or principle out of which all rational life comes from. If one were a pagan coming from Greek philosophy and mythology, they would've understood the logoi to be that which brings about life and from it emanates all reason, logic, and the whole idea of life itself. But for those who had an Old Testament background, those who had a relationship with the God of Israel would have understood "the word" in a very different way. It is understood that the word is by which God would speak to His people, the way in which God has created the world. By the word of His power, all things came into being. He spoke into the darkness, and light came.

But it is also the word which is repeated over and over again throughout the Old Testament. It is the word that is spoken to the people through Moses that "I will be your God, and you will be my people." It is the word of God that says, I will liberate you. I will redeem you. It is the word of God that comes to the people of God that says, I will save you from your enslavement, your enemies. I, the Lord, give you the word. I will be true to my promises. I, the word of the Lord, comes through the prophet Isaiah. I will heal you of your diseases. I will bind up your wounds. The word of God came to the prophets and said, I will send one who will come to you who will bring life to you, who will redeem you, and by whose wounds you will be healed.

In other words, the Old Testament understood the word logoi as being the way in which God reveals Himself. What John is echoing here is God's relentless desire to be known. And as the word of the Lord was spoken to the prophets, now John is connecting the word and personifying it by pointing to Jesus as the ultimate expression of God's word.

He says, "In the beginning was the word," that is Jesus. John is pointing to the prior existing that had no beginning and has no end to Jesus Himself. "And the word was with God." He's talking about relationship, one bound in intimacy as the Son of God. Then he says, "The word was God," saying not just that He was with God, not just that He's divine and self-existent and eternal, he's saying that this word is the divine, holy, and righteous I Am. Then John says, "He was in the beginning with God." And then he states the way in which he's now connecting the dots. When God said to let all things come into being, the mechanism through which He did this was through the power of His Son, through the instrument of His Son, that everything that has been made was made through Him.

This is interesting because even Paul later in his letters and the writer to the Hebrews, who were converted from Judaism from following Christ, would give the same testimony that through Him, everything that has been made was made. Everything that has been made was by Him, for Him, and to Him. What is he doing? He's saying Jesus was God, He was with God, He is God, and He is exalted above

all things. John is inviting us to see that in the incarnation that this word is God's relentless desire to make Himself known to us.

But then in describing the character of this word, of God's self-revelation, he uses light. And what is he doing there? He's less concerned about how the light is dispersed. He's using light as a way of describing the character of the word. And what is he saying? He says this light was the life itself. "All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men." This light is the source of not just physical life but emotional life, spiritual life, life as it ought to be lived. If He is God and if by Him all things were made, that includes us. To say that this life was the light of men, the light has come to invite us, who were in darkness of not knowing Him, back into relationship with the very one who has created life itself.

John is saying that He, the light of all of life, is to be the center of gravity of how we understand our identity, who we are and why we're here, our dignity and value for we have been made in the image of God, and this is the light. This light comes into the darkness, and this light is the life of men. John is saying this is how life is to be lived.

Jesus has come as the word who is the light who leads us to Himself as an invitation saying, this is life. This is not just physical life here, but it is eternal life. This is the promise. In so doing, by describing the light, John is giving us a picture into an understanding that God, who has created all things, did so by the word of His power mysteriously by the person and work of Jesus Christ who has now come in the flesh and is the light and the life inviting us into what it means to be human physically and emotionally and spiritually, and this is to be our hope. This is why John is writing.

Whether one has no background whatsoever of any understanding of the Christian faith or biblical testimony, understand that what John is inviting us to is to say if you want to know the purpose and reason for your life, if you want to know why you exist, if you want to have a sense of purpose and meaning and value and a true understand of dignity which no one can take away, know this. The light of life has come. If you've wondering whether God is silent, what we learn here is that God has been telling us this story from the beginning. His word has come. His word brings life, redemption, renewal, and freedom. But now it has come in the person and work of Jesus.

But there's a problem. That problem is the darkness. John tells us in verse 4, "In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." What does he mean by darkness?

On one level, he's not necessarily attaching any moral value to the idea of darkness. Darkness is a metaphor that there is a way of understanding your human life, your existence, but you're doing so apart from who God is and who He says you are. John would say that's living in darkness.

Also, we must understand that the darkness, he tells us, does not comprehend the light. The darkness is not passive, meaning the darkness actually says I don't understand you, and I don't want you. I don't want the light.

I don't mean to say it's not a yin and yang thing. But what John is saying is there are rival invitations. The darkness is all philosophy, all understanding of existence, or any idea of identity or being a human or having value and dignity that says, we define all of it, not God. Said another way, we've got this, and we don't need you. We're doing fine. The religion stuff causes all the problems.

Understand very clearly, the church is a representation of what God is doing in the world. God's principal purpose is to make a corporate group of people who He calls ecclesia, the called-out ones whom He calls His body for whom Christ died. He is the groom, and we are the bride. He has redeemed us, and

He calls it His church. His church is around the world, and yet all the world belongs to Him. Every square inch is God's kingdom, and yet His precious people are His church.

His church has a message. It has the word. It has institutions. It has ministries. It has a fervor that is empowered by the power of God. But the darkness does, too. The darkness, of which I used to fully participate in and be quite happy with and even defend, has its own understanding of life, has its own institutions, has its own gospel, and has its own set of priests.

As we survey the darkness, one way of understanding it is this. What is its gospel? And I mean this in the most positive sense. Pastor Mark Sayers, a pastor in Australia, describes the gospel of this new age this way. "Human beings find meaning through expansive freedom, self-expression, and pleasurable experiences. Humans' desire, value, and worth emerge from within them." The gospel of this age is that we will find our ultimate meaning and purpose through greater and greater expansive freedom, self-expression, and pleasurable experiences. Everything I am and do and want to be is defined by me and from inside of me.

This gospel emanates from its own institutions, and I've outlined a couple here. I would suggest that not only, as Mark Sayers says, is this the chief gospel of our age, but I would suggest that the church of this modern gospel which is largely in the west has its own priest and promises good news and light with great religious fervor. It emanates from the churches of big tech, social media, entertainment, and sports. They preach their sermons that invite us to find new life.

Do not let others define you. You define yourself. The problem is you don't have enough freedom to be able to express who you are, and we must remove all obstacles that say you cannot define yourself that way. This is the gospel of this new age. And here is the institution. Come into our social media environment. Trust in the reality and the power of tech to solve our problems. If we can get rid of the religious institutions, if we can rid ourselves of such old archaic thinking and find our hope in these things, this will bring freedom. This will bring connectedness. This will bring value to human life.

My honest question is how is it going? On the surface, it actually seems to be going pretty well. When I dip into Instagram, things seem to be going pretty well. Things are photoshopped, and they look really good. On Tik Tok, there's a lot of humor and laughter and song and creativity. It's great. It is. And just one potato chip after the other, you just keep scrolling. What about Facebook? We put out all of this stuff, and it becomes our confessional. And this is no critique. It becomes our family hearth. We are all putting these images up of families and events, and it all just looks great. We have low interest rates. We have the ability to get easy money. We can go buy and have it delivered to our houses, and we never have to leave.

How is it going? On the outside, they seem to be having their day. But on the private level, as a pastor, I've never had a period of my ministry where I've had more people privately express to me, both those inside and outside the church, the level of anxiety, depression, sexual brokenness, hurt, isolation, and loneliness they're experiencing. On the surface, the gospel of the new age is glitzy. On the private level, it doesn't seem to be working at all. There's a gap. There's a gap between what is preached, what is advertised, and what is actually delivered. At the end of the day, if I get to define who I am, if you don't like how I define myself, then I'm left in isolation, defensiveness, and looking for another source of life. The truth is there is profound glitz but profound darkness and hurt underneath.

But I ask a question. If you are a Christian, I want to encourage you not to think about what I'm saying purely in a sense of what's out there because I have a point of which I want to close this point on which is confession. I do not believe that the church's posture towards the world needs to be

antagonistic or a posture of being against. I think the posture we need to strike is one of humility and self-confession.

My question is this. How have we participated in this darkness? How have we perpetuated the glitz and glamor of this new gospel? How have we contributed to the brokenness, the profound brokenness sexually, relationally, emotionally? How have we taken up the instruments of this dark age and used it against others? If you are a professing Christian, how have we given ourselves over to a consumerist lifestyle with a thin veneer of Christian profession? How have we, the church of Jesus Christ in the west, given ourselves over to simply treating God as if the gospel were some form of religious buffet? I want this part of Jesus, but not this one. I like this part of the Bible, but not that one. How have we wanted to water down the gospel that we've essentially turned the church into the only way to be effective is to be like the celebrities that we see? Why do we continue to find pastors continuing to fall not just sexually, but pastors who are falling because they lead in ways that are completely selfish and narcissistic and self-seeking?

This issue is not out there. We must contend and survey the darkness in here and ask the Lord, forgive me where I have not invited your word and your light into this dark little corner that, if I'm honest, I want to keep. I want to support it. I want to feed it but have just enough of Jesus to make it okay. Lord, have mercy.

I believe, O Lord, that you do not call the world to renewal. You call your church to renewal. You do not call the world to repent. You call the church to repent first. Lord, help us to be honest about the darkness which we secretly delight in. Lord, forgive us.

But I have some good news. When we confess how we have perpetuated the darkness, defended the darkness, participated in the darkness, the Lord invites us nonetheless to hear the word of God. This isn't just to pagans and to those who don't know Christ. This is an invitation to His church to remember "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it," which tells us the word never returns void. This means the light comes in and invites us back into participation with the source of the light and life which is Jesus Himself.

And that's where I get to about us. Here's what's interesting about verse 5. In verse 5, John changes his verb tenses. In verses 1 through 4, he's speaking in the past tense, largely speaking. But in verse 5, he says, "The light shines," present tense, "in the darkness." As we're thinking about this, a natural question for us to ask is if Jesus, according to this testimony, is seated at the right hand of God the Father, then how is His light shining in present tense in the world? The beautiful part of it is that the Lord's light shines through the light of His church individually to those who call upon the name of Christ who are witnesses to Him and the church collectively to announce the gospel. We are a band of misfits and sinners broken and in need of mending, and He has rescued us, and we want to hold out the light of His grace.

This is what is interesting. He tells us that the about us page of the church, to use an Internet term, is desperate, broken, and lost sinners in the darkness and enjoying it have received a great light, the light of forgiveness and mercy that has transformed us. And we hold out that light to you. That is the about us page.

As we consider that, I want you to be reminded of the verses which I read last week, and I'll repeat. Hear now 2 Corinthians 4:4, "In their case," speaking of the world, "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers." The darkness and the father of darkness is Satan himself. Satan wants to keep everybody in the dark, and the darkness itself does not want to be discovered. Let's keep it in the darkness. And it says, the darkness has blinded the minds of those who do not believe "to keep them

from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." And then Paul says, "For what we proclaim is not ourselves."

We, CPC and any individual Christian who can hear my voice, we never preach ourselves for what would we preach? But Jesus is the one that we proclaim. "Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shown in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ." Therefore, as the person who puts their faith in Jesus Christ is rescued from darkness and blindness receives the light, and we become the light in the world around us.

How do we do that? How we do that, I believe, is saying honestly how do we move towards other people in love and acts of service? How do we move towards others in words of encouragement, of just leaning into other people's lives with how are you doing? How can I pray for you? I want to pray for you. Whether you know the Lord or not, I want to pray for you. I never had anybody tell me they didn't want me to pray for them, even atheists. Why? I think we need to be willing to lean into the lives of others which is messy because we are honestly a mess. We are an island of misfit toys, and the world is an island of misfit toys. If we who are a mess have been made clean and brought into the light if you profess faith in Christ, then who can we not take the gospel to?

I believe as we consider the world around us, the promise of our age is that we have ability to connect, but I believe all of our connecting has really disrupted our real connection. Instead of bringing us together, I believe the gospel of this new age has proven to do the opposite. We are more splintered than we ever have been. Our attempts to connect often are cheap substitutes for a relationship. Oftentimes, what we are really doing is just sharing our interests, our likes, our dislikes, our passions, but that's just a cheap substitute for a real relationship and connection. It's just an echo chamber of identification.

I believe what we really need, what the world really needs are people who are willing to walk, cry, laugh, sing, and live in connection with other human beings, life to life, in a steadfast love fueled by grace. I believe our world is hungry for those who are willing to walk, cry, laugh, sing, and live in connection with other human hearts rooted in steadfastness fueled by grace. Isn't it interesting that at advent we celebrate and look to the incarnation? For what did Jesus do? He came in, took on flesh, He walked, He laughed, He wept, He sang, and He loves us with a steadfast love fueled by His grace. And God, who is relentless in making Himself known, means for those who call on His name to take the light of His steadfast love fueled by grace and move towards others.

This is what we get to do because this is what He has done for us. May He give you His light, renew you in His light, and send you out with His light. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for the power of your word. Father, we thank you that you are not done with your church, yet we thank you that we are one day closer to the Lord returning. We are still in an advent posture awaiting the return of Christ, and yet your light has entered the world and brought renewal and dispelled darkness, and your light is the life of men. You, O Lord, give us life and give it abundantly. We do not proclaim ourselves, but we proclaim the Lord Jesus Christ and the glory of His grace. Lord, I now ask that you would renew us, forgive us, equip us to move into the world with your light. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.