

**Preacher:** Audrey Hollenberg-Duffey

**Scripture:** John 8:12-20

The most profound experience I have ever had of darkness was as a camper at Shepherd's Spring when we would explore the cave near Dam #4 off the C&O Canal. In the recesses of the cave, there is a chamber with high walls and ceiling. This cavernous room was far enough back in the cave and around twists and turns that there is absolutely no light remaining from the entrance of the cave. When we would arrive at this spot in our cave expedition, Nature Dave would always have us turn off our flashlights and be completely overcome by the darkness and the accompanying stillness that could be felt in way that can only be experienced in complete and total light deprivation. Even on the darkest night, there is always a little bit of light allowing us to make out at least shapes and movement, but here in the cave you could not even see your hand when it was just inches away from your face. The darkness was absolutely oppressive — I could feel it pressing in on me like a weighted blanket — and I remember always longing for the moment when he would invite us to turn the flashlights back on.

Those who are depressed and anxious often dread the nighttime because what our eyes cannot see, our minds will fill with the worst possible circumstances, not unlike a young child who has just been put to bed for the night. The darkness for children is a space where imaginations can run wild for better or for worse. “Mommy, there is a monster under my bed.” “Daddy there is a ghoul in my closet.” Many children long for the safety and comfort of a nightlight or cracked door so their active imaginations don't get the best of them.

However, there are not just imaginary dangers that come with darkness. How many stubbed toes and bruised shins can we chalk up to walking in the darkness? We have probably all had an experience where we were literally groping in the dark, walking around with arms outstretched to feel for the way to go. Our eyes were not made to be able to see in the darkness. It is light that allows us to take in and more honestly assess what is dangerous and what is safe.

Reverend Doctor Howard Chapman shares about when he learned how in some parts of the world it is dangerous to walk in darkness. He writes: “When I was a young boy, my parents were missionaries and we lived in Sierra Leone, West Africa. Flashlights were very important to us. You never walked anywhere at night without a flashlight. One problem was that there were no streetlights, so you needed a flashlight to keep from tripping and falling. But the other problem was snakes, deadly venomous snakes, that were nocturnal, hunting at night. If you stepped on a cobra or a black mamba and it bit you, you could be dead in a matter of minutes.

“I can remember, one night walking with my mother along a path. It was very dark. I was only about 5 or 6, and I kept bugging my mother to let me carry the flashlight. She finally agreed, but told me that it was not a toy and that we needed to be careful because of snakes. Well, I think that kind of freaked me out a little and made me nervous. I started shining the light off into the underbrush and long grass at the side of the path. My mother did not put up with that for very long. She snatched the light away from me and asked me what I thought I was doing. ‘Looking for snakes,’ I told her.

“‘No,’ she said, ‘we are not looking for snakes. We are looking at the path ahead. As long as there is nothing ahead of us we keep walking. If we see something, we stop. It will be afraid of the light and will go off into the dark. When it is safe, we go on. But the light must always shine on the path ahead.’”

C.S. Lewis once wrote: “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen; not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.” Imagery of light and illumination

is present throughout scripture. From Genesis to Revelation, light is a symbol of divine revelation, guidance, presence, hope, and righteousness. The first thing God creates in Genesis is light, which he says is good. And one of the last images we get of the new heaven and new earth in the book of Revelation is when there will be no more night and no more need for light because the Lord God will be all the light we need.

Today's scripture comes in the middle of what is called the Festival of Lights or the Festival of Tabernacles also called Sukkot. This festival is celebrated to remember the Israelites' 40-year sojourn through the wilderness after their exodus from Egypt. Jews would come to the temple in Jerusalem from all over to renew their relationship with God and be reminded of God's provision and care. As a part of this festival, four towering lamps were lit, permeating the entire temple court with light, and celebrants would dance in the glow. This light was meant to remind the people of the pillar of fire that led the Israelites through the wilderness, but also to commemorate the gift of the law which was as a light to God's people guiding them and directing them in the right direction.<sup>1</sup>

It is in the midst of this festival of light and the remembrance of God's provision that we get today's I AM statement from Jesus. In the joy-filled celebration of God's illuminating presence with his people in the wilderness, Jesus says "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." With these words, the Jews were invited to see the guiding presence of God, not in the pillar of fire, but in the one who stands in front of them. They were invited to see the illuminating wisdom of God, not in the law, but in Jesus himself. And this light is not just for one group of people, but for the whole world.

Light was a typical image in the Old Testament of the messianic hope. The prophet Isaiah, for example, foresaw that "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness — on them light has shined" (Isaiah 9:2). This light brings clarity to our path and brings us comfort, peace and a sense of safety and security.

But there is also another quality to light that is not all together comforting and safe. Light has the ability to expose, to pierce, and to reveal that which is hidden, that which we wish would remain hidden.

When we have been in the dark for a while, that first glimpse of light can be painful. The process of our eyes quickly dilating to keep out overwhelming light can hurt.

As much as we like to claim that we prefer the light to the dark, each of us has something or some things in our life that we would rather keep hidden, unexposed to the revealing light. To be brought into the revelatory light would require us to look at its ugly reality and face it for what it is. No wonder we sometimes would rather scurry away from the light like a roach in a cold, dark room. To be truly exposed to the true light would make us vulnerable. To testify and witness, as John the Baptist does in the opening of the Gospel of John, to the presence and the coming of the light may not be good news for humanity.

In John 3:19-21, Jesus says this: "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

Jesus knew that as the light of the world, he would not only be a guiding light for all people, but that his light would be intimidating and painful for those who hide in the darkness of their sin and desires.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Holidays/Fall\\_Holidays/Sukkot/sukkot.html](http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Holidays/Fall_Holidays/Sukkot/sukkot.html)

Jan Richardson, a poet and theologian, writes: “Not that the dark is evil in itself. But that we sometimes use it as a place where we think we can hide, where we can cloak what we do not want seen or known in the daylight. And this is one of the keenest challenges and invitations in seeking the way of Christ: to allow him to draw us into a place where we can be seen. Where we can be known. Where we can unhide ourselves.”

I remember hearing my parents and other elders and mentors of mine saying, “Nothing good happens after midnight.” And while this is not universally true, there is something about the darkness of night that brings out the worst in people. In the cloaking quality of darkness, we assume that our evil deeds can truly be hidden and unknown. But the light of truth does not allow our sin to remain hidden.

This is why in his letter to the Romans, Paul writes: “you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep... the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of the darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day...” (Romans 13:11-13a).

One of my favorite parts about our cave expeditions at camp was when Nature Dave would give us Wintergreen Lifesavers in the large, dark chamber of the cave. Before we turned off our lights, he would give one to each of us. And after sitting in the darkness for a little, he would tell us to put the lifesaver in our mouth and chew it with our mouths open. As we would chew, the lifesavers would emit small sparks of light. He would use this as a lesson in energy and how, in this case, crushing the sugars in the candy forced some electrons out of their atomic field causing a small amount of light, visible only in intense darkness.

Where such pervasive darkness exists, there is little hope of thriving; little hope of life and growth. There are moments in our life when we seem to be overcome by the kind of darkness that presses in on us and threatens our prosperity and growth. This darkness may even seem preferable. A place where we can abuse, lie, manipulate, and hide the ugly parts of ourselves. But in that darkness, the spark of the light of Jesus still reminds us of the truth that is written in 1 John 1:5: “God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.” Even in the most oppressive places of dark, there is a spark of light — there is still hope that darkness will not win. Everything that we hope to keep hidden will be exposed to the light of truth that enlighten us. Christ witnesses to the world that through the power of his Father, he comes to the world as the true light that illumines our path. And all who follow him will carry in their very earthen vessels that spark of light which the darkness cannot overcome. May we all lay ourselves fully bare and vulnerable in the true light of Christ and find, not judgment, but grace and forgiveness. And in the warmth and safety of Christ’s grace, may we call all to its inviting glow. And the world will never know darkness. May it be so. Amen.