



"Light Changes Everything"

Scripture – John 8:12-20

Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson

Sunday, August 1, 2021

"I AM" Sermon Series:

If four artists were to paint the same model, they would create four unique portraits. Their works would differ based on perspective, personal style, or simply the play of the light. In the same way, the four Gospel writers create four unique portraits of Jesus the Messiah. One way John paints his portrait is through metaphor — comparing Christ to images that would be familiar to the Gospel's original audience: bread, light, shepherd, vine. Throughout the Gospel, Jesus likens himself to various objects and concepts through statements that always begin the same way: "I am ..." During Dr. Jones' sabbatical, the Rev. Sudie Niesen Thompson — along with the Rev. Jill Getty and the Rev. Dr. Tracy Keenan — will explore the seven "I AM" statements of John's Gospel and the ways they contribute to a unique portrait of the Messiah who dwells among us.

"Light Changes Everything," which focuses on the statement, "I am the Light of the World," is the second sermon in the series.

Beulah sees the world differently. In her novel *One for the Blackbird, One for the Crow*, Olivia Hawker describes Beulah as a girl with strange, heavy-lidded eyes. She is dreamy and odd, to the point that other characters think her simple. But Beulah is not dim-witted; she does not move through life in a distracted daze, as others first assume. It's just that her eyes are gazing at a vista that she alone can see. Beulah finds beauty in the most ordinary things. When she is harvesting corn on her family's Wyoming farm, she stops to marvel at an ear, fascinated by kernels that are flecked with white or speckled with red as deep as garnets. She stares until her eyes are filled with tears — tears of wonder. Sometimes Beulah saves the things that catch her eyes — things that no one else would notice: stones and feathers and bits of wood. She keeps these treasures tucked away under a floor board in her bedroom, safe and sound. At one point, she pulls them out to show the neighbor boy, Clyde. She describes the moment:

I passed him a snail shell. It wasn't much bigger than the glass marbles my brothers played with, but it was ten times prettier. I found it on the riverbank, I said. Isn't it the loveliest thing you ever seen? Clyde shook his head, a small gesture, vague and unsettled. He said, it's just a snail shell. But

look at the colors. Brown, he said. You don't look very close. Maybe you need spectacles. Hold it up to the light. Really look, now, and tell me what you see.

Clyde held the snail shell up toward the window. He turned it slowly in his hand. Cast in the easy afternoon light ... the shell seemed to glow from within. What had seemed brown at first careless glance revealed its layers of color. Oranges and reds, subdued like a shaded lantern ... Hues of gold and caramel lay one beside the other in delicate ridges, each ridge finer than a hair. One dark line and one pale, both lines carrying a hint of subtle green, wrapped from the shell's edge toward the fat bump on its side ... Clyde traced the dark line with his finger, around and around till it joined the pale line and the line gave way to uniform brownness. I smiled. He saw the beauty in it now.¹

Beulah sees the world differently. She sees the world *fully*, with eyes inclined to wonder. Beulah sees miracles in the mundane and splendor in the ordinary. It's as if she looks at the world through the lens of grace, expecting to find beauty even in things others would cast aside. Beulah's gift reminds us that there is more to seeing than sight. Seeing — *fully* seeing — requires looking, seeking, searching ... watching the world with eyes that are inclined to wonder.

This is a theme of John's Gospel — the capacity to see fully, to perceive the miracle amidst the mundane. And it starts with seeing Jesus — with recognizing who Jesus is. In this section of the Gospel, Jesus is teaching in the Jerusalem temple. He is there for the Festival of Booths, when pilgrims from across Palestine would stream to the holy mountain to celebrate the presence of the holy. This festival recalls God's provision of light during the wilderness wanderings, when the Almighty descended as a pillar of fire to guide the Israelites' way. To celebrate, the temple would be lit by massive bowls of oil filled with thousands of burning wicks. During the festival the Temple Mount would become a beacon, a light shining in the darkness for all to see.

It is against this backdrop that Jesus walks into the temple and begins to teach. Those who hear him are astonished, saying, "How does this man have such learning, when he has never been taught?" The crowd is confused; they cannot comprehend such wisdom coming from a common carpenter. The Pharisees are quick to observe that he does not have the right credentials; he does not have the proper pedigree. Jesus does not fit their perception of a prophet, much less that of the Messiah, so they dismiss him out-of-hand: "Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee," they say.

Despite the light radiating from the temple, the people *within* the temple fail to see. Their vision is clouded by preconceived notions, by prejudice, by the same presumption voiced early in John's Gospel: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (1:46). Like Clyde who — at first, careless glance — sees only brown, the crowd sees something common: a tradesman with no formal training who hails from a podunk town. But *unlike* Clyde, the crowd does not take a closer look. "Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment," Jesus chides — urging the people to see differently, encouraging them to see fully. Still, they do not recognize Jesus. They do not see him for who he is — the presence of God in the world. So, Jesus draws upon the imagery at hand — the temple illuminated by thousands of burning wicks; a beacon of light shining in the darkness. "I am the Light of the World," Jesus says. "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." Jesus points to the pools of light to help his audience see differently, to see fully ... to recognize that God is manifest *not* through the oil and flame set up to signal sacred presence, but in flesh and blood — through the Incarnate Word standing before them.

¹ Olivia Hawker, *One for the Blackbird, One for the Crow* (Seattle: Lake Union Publishing, 2019), pp. 252-253.

For the Pharisees, this proclamation changes nothing; the revelation escapes them. They still cannot see fully because they rely on their own understanding and they judge by human standards. But for others — for those whose eyes are opened, who recognize Jesus for who he is — the encounter changes everything. Because light changes everything. Just as the slightest ray of light alters the landscape — allowing us to make out shapes in the shadows — the Light of the World transforms the way we see. What happens next is illuminating. As soon as Jesus leaves the temple, he comes upon a man who has been blind since birth. You know this story; we hear it often during the season of Lent. This is the one where Jesus spits on the ground, mixes saliva and dust, and spreads the paste on the man's eyes. "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam," Jesus tells him. And the man, who has literally been in the dark his entire life, does as Jesus says. He goes to Siloam, washes the mud off his eyes, and returns able to see.

What's interesting is how the account begins. "As [Jesus] walked along, he saw a man blind from birth," John tells us. It quickly becomes clear that this man has been defined and confined by prejudice. Even the disciples default to common perceptions: "Rabbi," they ask, "who sinned ... that he was born blind?" And it seems the Twelve are not the only ones to notice him only as blind. After the man returns from the pool of Siloam, we learn how others have viewed him his entire life. John tells us, "Those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, 'Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?' ... Those *who had seen him before as a beggar* ... The neighbors have passed by this man countless times; perhaps they've paused at the city gate to drop a coin in his cup. But they've never looked with eyes inclined to wonder; they have never truly seen. In fact, now that the man's eyes are open, they can't even place him. Their question spurs a debate: "Is not this the man who used to sit and beg?"

"It is him!" some say. But others aren't sure. They don't recognize him because they've never taken the time to look. But Jesus sees differently; Jesus sees fully. It's the first thing he does in this story. He *sees* a man who was born blind, a man who is begging beside the city gate because his community has cast him aside. Jesus sees a human being no one else sees. This is the first act of grace from the One who is Grace Incarnate; opening the man's eyes follows. "I am the Light of the World," Jesus says, for the second and last time in the Gospel. And, then, he spreads mud on the man's eyes. This encounter changes everything. The man who was born blind returns with eyes that are open; the man who has lived his life in darkness now sees the light of day. But not only that — he can behold the Light of the World, as well. As the story ends the man casts his eyes upon Jesus. And he sees. He sees fully. Unlike the Pharisees, who could *not* perceive the Light shining in their midst, this man recognizes Jesus. He sees Jesus for who he is. "Lord, I believe," he says. And he worships him. Light changes everything. The Light of the World changes everything. Just as the light streaming through the window transforms a snail shell from dull brown to swirling layers of gold and green, the Light of the World transforms the way we see. This is true for the man who was born blind; his encounter with Jesus changes the way he sees, literally *and* figuratively. And this gift of light can change us too, if only we have eyes to see. For Jesus shows us how to see differently, how to see fully, how to see with eyes inclined to wonder.

With Beulah at his side, Clyde begins to see the world differently. Not just the treasures she presents to him — the snail shell, a crow's feather with deep purple hues, a stone flecked with sparkling pinpoint dots — but everything. As their story continues beyond the moment when Clyde holds the snail shell up to the light, the two of them search the wilderness for a sheep who's wandered off. She has left the safety of the farm to find a quiet place to give birth, but — of course — the ewe is in danger as night falls. So Beulah and Clyde grab a lantern and set out. They find her deep in the canyon, having just given birth. But, when they lift the light, they discover something surprising. The lamb's face is cloven, deeply as a hoof; the newborn has two perfectly formed muzzles, two mouths opening in silent entreaty. The sight revolts Clyde. He points his shotgun toward the creature, but Beulah stops him. For, where he sees a monster, she sees a miracle. Beulah sees something beautiful, and she's determined to care for this gift. So she wraps the lamb in her shawl and carries it home.

Beulah looks at the world through the lens of grace, expecting to find beauty even in things others would cast aside. And, with Beulah at his side, Clyde begins to see beauty as well. Clyde's affection for the lamb grows. Even though he knows it cannot survive long, he cares for it attentively, for he sees now a creature that is worthy of love. The gaze of grace enlarges his worldview; instead of seeing predators simply as threats, he begins to regard them with wonder and awe. Where once he saw the blackbird and the crow only as raiders of his garden, he finds himself planting extra seeds to ensure the birds have enough to eat. Awakened to the wonder around him, Clyde is able to turn away from the constricted worldview of his harsh father — the man who taught him creation was to be tamed with force, not tended with care. What he sees with his own eyes reveals a different truth: that all the world is worthy of respect, of love. It all began with holding the snail shell up to the light, with the voice urging him to look more fully. Clyde looks with eyes inclined to wonder, and it changes everything.

I wonder, what would happen if we did the same? If we began holding things up to the Light ... Not to the easy afternoon light that streams through the window, but to the Light of the World — the True Light, which enlightens everyone. What if we held up the ordinary things we would usually overlook? What if we held up every person we tend to judge with human standards, every person we tend to cast aside? What if we held all of life up to the Light? Would we begin to see the world differently? More fully? Would we begin to see the world as Jesus sees, with eyes that are inclined to wonder? Would we find our eyes open, our hearts transformed? I think so. I believe so. Because light changes everything. The Light of the World changes everything. And after we've encountered Christ, there is nothing left but to show others the beauty we have seen.

Prayers of the People – Barbara Jobe

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer,

It seems like only yesterday when a sense of optimism began to wash over our communities. The COVID vaccine logjam had broken, and, in America, shots were readily available to all. Many eagerly anticipated shedding our masks, reuniting with extended family members, socializing with friends, or planning vacations. Renewed energy and can-do attitudes prevailed in the light of long summer days. Now, as the summer days slowly wane, some of us furrow our brows anew as we ponder the consequences of entrenched vaccine resistance, the increased transmissibility of the Delta variant, and reports of breakthrough infections among vaccinated people. Other challenges also loom large in our consciousness: extreme weather events throughout the globe, political stalemate in our country, unequal justice and opportunities for our citizens, escalating violence in our cities. We find ourselves living in the shadows of uncertainty and doubt. Today we pray for your guidance as we struggle to understand our world. We look to You to show us Christ's light that points to the truth.

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Lord, we ask your blessings on those in our midst who *reflect* Christ's light, allowing others to see your love.

- Our pastors proclaim the word and tend the flock. Thank you for Sudie and Jill's pastoral care. And for this congregation's support of Greg's sabbatical. May his time of rest refresh and renew his spirit for your service.
- Our Session has faithfully grappled with responsibly re-opening our church. Give our lay leaders wisdom and imagination to envision new ways of doing things as we look to the future.
- Volunteers and staff teach our children in Vacation Bible School and provide creative Christian education opportunities during the program year. May the seeds they plant bear fruit.

- Generous members and friends donate food for feeding programs, community refrigerators and food pantries, and school uniforms and backpacks for local students. Thank you for helping them overcome compassion-fatigue as they faithfully continue your work as long as there is need.
- Those with a heart for far-away brothers and sisters foster mission engagement in Guatemala and Syria. May they continue to extend your love to the corners of the world.
- The Peace and Justice Work Group shines a light on racial and social injustice. May the awareness they raise lead to real and meaningful change.
- Our Earth Care Committee continually engages our congregation in care of God's creation. May their message become part of our collective DNA.

Inspired by these servants of the Lord, our world view is changed. In them we see a world where we look after one another, to serve not our own but one another's best interests. Let us now step out of the shadows of uncertainty and doubt and walk in the light of your love! Lord, we offer this prayer and the unspoken prayers in our hearts in the name of your son, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray, saying...

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And, lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever. Amen