

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. Corresponding to the 40 days that Jesus spent in the wilderness being tempted by the devil, the season of Lent is a forty-day period between Ash Wednesday and Easter, excluding Sundays. We do not count Sundays during this time because as Martin Luther, the leader of the Protestant Reformation, said: "Every Sunday is a little Easter." It was originally a time to prepare candidates for baptism and reception into the church. It has now become a time of self-examination, repentance, and spiritual growth for Christians. It should be a time when we ask ourselves the questions: who is Jesus Christ to me; what is my relationship with Him; what has He done for me; and what does He want me to do for Him?

In order to do this, starting today and for the next six Sundays, we will focus on the question that Jesus asked His disciples in Matthew 16:15 - "Who do you say that I am?" A while back there was a billboard on I-25 just south of the airport that read "Who is Jesus?" Now that's a serious question; have you ever given it serious thought? Well, that's what we are going to focus on during Lent this year, who is Jesus Christ? I hope and pray that during this time each one of us will discover or re-affirm who Jesus is to us – what do we think about Him; what does He mean to us; how do we visualize Him; and what is our personal relationship with Him?

To do this, we are going to examine the seven "I Am" sayings of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of John. These are seven self-descriptions that Jesus gave us of Himself. In each of these "I Am" sayings, Jesus identifies Himself with symbols of everyday life in the ancient times, and through each of these illustrations He reveals something about Himself. By studying these sayings, hopefully, each one of us will discover something new about Jesus and grow in our personal relationship with Him. Let's start our discovery in the eighth chapter of John, verse 12.

Read John 8:12

Whenever I think of light, I always think about light bulb jokes. For example, how many Baptists does it take to change a light bulb? Answer: 4 – one to change the bulb and three to remind the congregation how much they liked the old bulb.

How many Methodists would it take? At least 15 – one to change the bulb, and three committees to approve the change and to decide who brings the green bean casserole.

How many Lutherans? None – Lutherans don't believe in change.

How many TV evangelists? We really don't know but keep those checks coming.

Finally, how many electricians? Just one, but they'll charge you for the whole circuit.

In the passage that I just read, Jesus was in Jerusalem to participate in the Feast of the Tabernacles. On the evening of the first day of the feast, there is a ceremony called the Illumination of the Temple. Four large lamp stands in the Court of the Women were lit and produced so much light that they could be seen from all over Jerusalem. It is against this background that Jesus makes His claim to be the Light of the World. In a sense, Jesus is telling the people do you see the lights in the Temple piercing the surrounding darkness? Well, for those who will follow me there will always be light and not only for one exciting night, but for all the days of their life. The light in the Temple is bright, but it will go out. But I, as the Light of the World, will last forever.

Throughout his gospel, the Apostle John contrasts light and darkness. Darkness can be defined as having little or no light. We all have experienced some form of darkness in our lives. Of course, there are the times when our homes lose electricity and we are thrown into complete darkness looking for the candles, flashlight or cellphone, and usually bumping into something during our search. But then there are those unfortunate times of life when the world seems to cave in on us with financial problems, health issues, broken relationships, depression, guilt, or the loss of a loved one; those times that writers have described as “the dark night of the soul.”

In the New Testament darkness stands for the very opposite of the Christian life. It represents the life that a person lived before they accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, or the life of a person who has strayed from the Lord. Darkness is separation from God and disobedience to the teachings of Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, light represents that which is good. As we all know, light is essential for life, our health and our well-being. When Judy and I were in Seward, Alaska, on a youth mission trip with our church in Grants, it was daylight for almost 22 hours a day in the summer, which was very enjoyable. However, we learned from the locals that there was a lot of depression in the winter when there were only a few hours of sunlight each day. The ability to give and sustain life is symbolized by light; it is the life-giving force of the universe. God’s first words in the creation account in Genesis are: “Let there be light.” This act made life possible, and that light still gives life today.

Most people feel safer when there is light. Many children and even some adults sleep with a nightlight to make them feel more secure. In the world we live in today, safety and security are important issues in our daily lives. And there is no safer place to be than in the arms of the Almighty God, the author of every good and perfect gift, and His Son Jesus Christ, the Light of the World.

In the verse that I read earlier, Jesus said: “No one who follows me stumbles around in the darkness. I provide plenty of light to live in.” Jesus is the very light of God who came to live

among us. Thus, He is the light that gives life. Just as a flower that is never exposed to sunlight can never blossom, so our lives can never display the grace and beauty that they should until they are exposed to the light of Jesus. To be a follower of Jesus is to give our whole body, mind, and soul to the obedience of the Master, and to walk with the Light of the World. It is not enough to simply look at and gaze on the Light; we must follow it, believe in it, and walk in it. We must let Jesus be our constant companion on this journey through life.

When we walk alone, we are bound to fall and stumble because so many of life's problems are beyond our control. Apart from Jesus, there is no deliverance from the darkness of sin, no real meaning in life, and no guidance along the road of life. When we walk alone, we are bound to take the wrong path, because we don't have the true compass for life. The person who has a trustworthy guide and an accurate map is sure to make it safely to their destination. Jesus Christ is our guide; He alone is the One who lights our path. To walk in His light is to walk in safety through this life and the life to come.

Thus, one of the functions of light is to guide our path through the darkness like the headlights on your car. God offers us guidance in His Word and in His Son, and shows us the way around the obstacles, dangers, and temptations that we encounter each day of our lives. Remember the words of the 119th Psalm: "Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light for my path." The *Message* paraphrases it as follows: "By your words I can see where I am going, they throw a beam of light on my dark path." God lights our path so that we can arrive safely home. When Christ comes into our life, the darkness is past and the light shines. God calls each of us out of the darkness and into the marvelous light revealed only in His Son.

Another function of light is to reveal the flaws and the imperfections in things. The word "light" in the Gospel of John is used interchangeably with the word "truth." Thus, the imperfections of life are revealed in the presence of the Light of the World. To shed light on a subject means to reveal, disclose the truth about it. Everything looks different in the light. Jesus as the Light of the World enables us to see the truth about ourselves and the truth about God. In Jesus, we see ourselves as God sees us, and we see God as He desires to be seen.

Now this may be the reason that some people never come to the light, for fear that their bad habits will be exposed, and that they may have to give them up and change the way they are currently living. Some people change their ways when they see the Light; others only when they feel the heat. In the third chapter of John, Jesus says that "light has come into the world, but the people love darkness instead of light because their evil deeds will be exposed in the light." They seek darkness because they are not interested in pleasing God.

Back when electricity was first being introduced to a little Scottish village, almost everyone in a particular church switched from their propane lanterns to electricity as soon as it could be

hooked up. However, the oldest couple in the congregation who lived outside the village couldn't get their electricity because they were waiting for the poles to go up and the wire to be strung. So, they continued to use their lanterns.

The day finally came when electricity was brought to their home. Everybody in the church came for the special event. The old man waited for it to get extra dark; then he told his wife to turn on the switch. When she did, light filled the room, and everyone cheered. The old man ginned from ear to ear, picked up his lantern and said: "This sure makes lighting my lamps easier." And with that he lit the lamp, and his wife turned the electricity off. Sometimes we are like that. We can't see the light for the need to hang on to the darkness of our past.

Have you ever tried to catch your shadow? If you have, you know that no matter how fast or quick you are; you will never catch it. However, shadows provide an excellent lesson for life. If you walk towards the source of light, your shadow will always be behind you. In the same way, when you face the light of Jesus Christ, your shadows - your past, problems, regrets, and disappointments are always behind you, and you enjoy the peace and joy that only Jesus can bring into your life. However, if you turn your back to the Lord, then you are once again in darkness. Therefore, as we go through life, we should keep our eyes on the Light of the World and let Him guide and light our path with our shadows always behind us. The closer you walk with the Lord the more light you have; however, the farther you get from Jesus Christ, the deeper the shadows.

One evening when Robert Louis Stevenson was a child, he stood at the window watching an old lamplighter at work. The lamplighter made his way down the street lighting one lamp pole after another. This process fascinated young Stevenson. Thinking that his quietness meant that he was up to no good, the nanny called out to him: "Robert, what are you doing?" To which he replied: "I'm watching a man making holes in the darkness!" That's what Jesus Christ did on the first Christmas and on Easter morning, and that's what He has been doing ever since in the lives of those who will accept Him as their Lord and Savior. Jesus Christ is the transforming light who touches each heart, piercing its darkness, and making His glory shine within it.

Now we as His followers are called to let His light shine through us. In the fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells us: "You are the light of the world. Let your light shine before others so that they may see how you live and praise the Father in heaven." As the moon reflects the light of the sun, so are we to reflect the light of Jesus Christ to all around us through our words and actions. Have you ever thought of yourself as a light - a candle, flashlight, or headlight? Well, that's what Jesus expects of each of us.

As the lights of Jesus Christ in this world, there are two things that we must be careful of. First, we must realize that all lights have a power source; they do not produce any light on their own like Jesus does. He is the source of our light. We must be careful not to become our own light or shine the light on ourselves. Just as there is only one sun that lights the whole world, so there is only one Jesus Christ. We are called to be the light of Jesus Christ and reflect His love, grace, and mercy, and not create our own limelight!

Also, we are not to hide our light. As Christians we are not called to a secret discipleship where we only acknowledge Jesus as our Lord and Savior on Sunday morning as we sneak into church hoping our friends and neighbors don't see us. Jesus didn't say you are the light of the church, but of the world. We are not only asked to live out our faith and beliefs openly each and every day, but also to share it with others when God gives us the opportunity. We are called to pass on the light; to let our little light shine!

The eyes of the world are on us. George Fox, a former leader of the Quakers, said that every Quaker ought to light up the countryside for ten miles around him. God has sent us into the world to shine for Him – to light up this dark world. Jesus came to be the Light of the World, but men tried to put out the Light at Calvary. But it didn't work, today the Light shines even brighter from an empty cross and an empty tomb. It is our responsibility to never let this light go out.

Jesus Christ offers true light and hope to a world today walking in darkness and shadows. Because of this we will never have to walk in darkness again if we only come and follow the true Light of the World, Jesus Christ. Don't let darkness overshadow your life, come to the Light and then let the Light shine through you. Amen