



FIRST  
PRESBYTERIAN  
CHURCH  
SPARTANBURG

## WALK IN THE LIGHT

Jeremiah 31:31-35; John 12:27-36

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This past week, we lived with the fearful anticipation of tornados. They did hit the deep South with destruction, loss of power, and even loss of life. In South Carolina, we have learned to take weather threats seriously. Howling winds and torrential rains knock down trees, uproot outbuildings, and put out the lights. I remember as a child huddling in the living room with my family when Hurricane Hazel cut a path of destruction through our state. The wind and rain pounded the house. The large oak trees in the yard groaned. Then there was an eerie calm in the eye of the storm before the wind hit again. Branches crashed to the ground; debris flew everywhere; and the lights went out. Gathered in one room, we lit our candles and waited through the dark of the night.

So much of the time, we take light for granted. We have the sun by day and the moon by night. In the evening we flip a switch, and the house lights up. Our headlights and streetlamps make it possible to drive on the darkest nights. We take light for granted until the power goes out and we find ourselves in a dark place.

Light and darkness have long been metaphors for good and evil, for easy times and troubled times, and for happiness and grief. In the Bible, light is a metaphor for God. The epistle of John says, "God is light and in God there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). At the beginning of time God said, "Let there be light." God spoke the creation into existence. There

would be no universe without light. There would be no life on earth without the light of the sun.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus speaks of himself as the light of the world. In the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter, as Jesus faces the cross, he tells the crowds that the light will be with them only a little longer. While they have the light of Christ with them, they are to walk in the light. Through the darkness of the cross, God makes a new covenant with us. In the resurrection, the light will come again and dwell in our hearts forever. Jeremiah told the people that the covenant will be written upon our hearts. The light of Christ will dwell within each one of us so that we may walk as the children of light.

There are many people who diminish Jesus and see him as little more than a prophet, a moral teacher, or a spiritual butler whose main purpose is to manage their personal problems. Some of these folks have good intentions, but they share a common misperception. They do not see Jesus through the witness of John. Jesus comes from the Father to bring the light of life to a dark and fallen world.

Is it the darkness that keeps us from hearing the claim that Jesus Christ is the light of the world? He is the one through whom all things were created, in whom all things are redeemed, by whom all things are sustained, and in whom all things find their destiny. Yet, there is so much darkness in the world. Mass

shootings and violence strike our schools, target ethnic groups, and erupt in our homes and on our streets. In another city, where I volunteered in a homeless shelter, I learned how the homeless population is afflicted with a disproportionate amount of mental illness and drug addiction. Many of these homeless men and women are our returning veterans who are suffering from moral injury and severe psychological trauma. The darkness hovers over the nations of the world where people flee oppression, poverty, hunger, and war.

The darkness is not only around us; it is within us. We struggle with our petty jealousies, anger, addictions, prejudices, and small-minded ways. We hide from the light of Christ. We are afraid to venture out and walk in the light as children of God. We find ourselves living stress-filled, anxious lives. Like people lost in a dark cave, we cannot seem to find our way through the darkness to reach the light.

Jesus comes to us as the light of life. He comes so that we may walk in the light of God. When the Dead Sea scrolls were discovered in the last century, they gave us some of the most ancient copies of the Hebrew Scriptures. They also gave us writings about the beliefs of the religious community that preserved these scrolls in clay jars in caves. These writings speak of the community members, thought to be Essenes, as "the sons of light" who are guided by

the “prince of lights.” In contrast, the “angel of darkness” is an evil spirit who fights against them. The faithful walk in the light while the evildoers walk in darkness (*Anchor Bible Commentary: The Gospel According to John*, p. 340). These scrolls help us understand the teaching of Jesus – that there are two ways of living in the world: walking in the darkness or walking in the light.

What does it mean to walk in the light? In his novel, *Crossing to Safety*, Wallace Stegner describes the central character Charity as a woman of great intelligence and commanding presence. Dying of cancer, she is at her family’s summer home. She has lost none of her vitality. Old friends have travelled across the country to visit her. Seeing Charity in the sunlight resting on a lounge chair, a friend reflects: “She will burn bright until she goes out; she will go on standing on her tiptoes till she falls.... Time has not dimmed her; sickness has only increased her wattage. She lights things up like a [powerful lamp]” (p. 276). Those who walk in the light of Christ do not let the course of their lives be set by circumstances, limited resources, or the opinion of others. They let the light of Christ illumine their path and show the way forward. They have the courage to stand up for what is right in the eyes of God. As Christians, we are called to light things up.

How do we walk in the light? We look to Jesus and see how he lived; we listen to his teachings and follow them. In John’s gospel, Jesus says, “I am the light of the world.” In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “You are the light of the world.” We also look around us and see the people through whom the light of

Christ shines. They are luminous people. We look to those who walk in the light.

Dr. Charles Kraemer, the retired pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Charlotte and former Moderator of the General Assembly, taught me what it means to walk in the light. I met him my first year in parish ministry when I was serving as an intern in that congregation. One Sunday, Dr. Kraemer was preaching. He approached the pulpit with slow steps and slumping shoulders. He had a deeply wrinkled face with a deadpan expression. He was well up in years. With his wry sense of humor he began, “I guess when you looked up here this morning and saw me, you thought it was Youth Sunday all over again.” Then he read from the Book of Acts – about how the Holy Spirit led the church to hold their goods in common and to use them to minister to everyone in need. Dr. Kraemer had served the church right after the Second World War. He had convinced a somewhat cranky congregation to stay downtown and minister to the urban community when some wanted to move the church to the suburbs. He started a Child Development Center for the children of single parents who worked downtown. He even let the children play on the sacred front lawn, the only green space downtown. He began other outreach ministries that touched the lives of the hungry and homeless. While he was there, his ministry met with resistance. Some thought the church should not get involved in those kinds of things.

As Dr. Kraemer began his sermon, he said that when he was the pastor of the church, people complained that

he was not spiritual enough. After a long pause, he said with a twinkle in his eye, “That was a long time ago. You were wrong. I was right ... And I forgive you.” Today, that congregation is a thriving church with a vital ministry for Christ in the heart of the city. Dr. Kraemer knew in his kind but strong ways, the difference between wandering around in a dark swamp of sentimental self-serving spirituality and walking tall in the light of Christ.

Such luminous people are all around us, in our congregation and community. They all share something in common: they use their passion and their gifts to bring the light of God to a dark world. They touch the lives of school children, refugees, folks with disabilities, the homeless, the forgotten, and the ostracized. They work to build community, overcome poverty, heal the sick, increase faith, and care for the earth. They live to bear witness to the light. They understand that to walk in the light of Christ, we welcome the stranger, practice forgiveness, build bridges, overcome stereotypes, tear down walls, and take the risk of loving others no matter who they are. Walking in the light keeps Christ at the center of the world and at the center of our lives. Then his light shines through us.

Two weeks ago, we received the news that a young adult whom we had known and loved in the church died after a twenty-five-year struggle with the aftereffects of cancer. When she was a child, she had kidney cancer that metastasized. The reoccurrence of the cancer was misdiagnosed, and she came within a few hours of dying. For twenty-five years she has endured surgeries,

infections, paralysis, and pain. She has lived her young life in a wheelchair. She never lost her trust in God or her desire to serve others. A year ago, she quoted on her Facebook page the words from Revelation: "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, and neither shall there be mourning, nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." To these words she added, "I don't know about you, but I can't wait till that day." From her wheelchair she walked as a child of the light.