

**Sermon preached by Pastor Robert Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 16, 2008**

JESUS: THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

John 8:12-20

The very first Palm Sunday! What a great day that must have been! There on the streets of Jerusalem – the crowd pushing and shoving, people trying to get glimpses of Jesus, waving palm branches above their heads, screaming louder than a Redskin fan, “Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!” What a sight! Everyone happy to see that their promised king had come. Do you wish you had been there?

Well, a short time later – maybe just a few hours – Jesus told this crowd that He was about to die. That He must be lifted up and be crucified. That was news they didn’t want to hear. He said to them:

“The light is going to be with you just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. . . Put your trust in the light while you have it, so that you may become sons of light.”

These folks didn’t understand why Jesus had come. They didn’t understand what He meant by light and darkness and were so confused about Jesus that later that week they became willing accomplices in His murder. The same crowd that cheered the Lord’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, by Friday called for His execution on a Roman cross. What do you think made the difference? What was it about light and darkness that they didn’t understand?

Well, once before Jesus said almost the same thing to the Pharisees. In one of those outrageous statements, the ones we call “I Am” sayings of Jesus, He said “I am the Light of the World; whoever follows me will never walk in darkness.”

I am the light of the world. Here, Jesus uses a couple of words that may seem like nothing special to our ears, but would ring crystal clear to the Jews. In the way Jesus said “I am the Light,” He spoke the name that God used to identify Himself. He spoke the name He used when He called Moses to lead Israel out of their slavery in Egypt. Yahweh or Jehovah. The divine name. The holy name of God. Jesus is making an undeniable claim to be God.

This morning, let’s take a few minutes to look at what Jesus meant by this remarkable claim to be the divine light of the world.

THE NATURE OF DARKNESS

Jesus said, “He who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the light of life.” If we want to understand how Jesus is the light of the world, we must first understand the nature of darkness. What was this lack of light, this black gloom, this darkness that Jesus found in the world?

In the Bible, evil and fear are often described as darkness. We fear the dark because we are afraid. In the night, we think danger waits. Few of us venture out late on a dimly lit street without at least a little concern. In Proverbs, we read, “But the way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not

know what makes them stumble” (4:19). Jesus said, “. . . people loved the darkness because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19). Wickedness, danger, the bad stuff of life always feels more comfortable in the shadows where the glare of light does not expose. We know that we never want our own sin to come under the spotlight. Evil loves darkness.

The idea of darkness also speaks to disappointment and depression. The “dark night of the soul” was how medieval mystics described a melancholy spirit. Those who are imprisoned by the shadows of gloom and despair are in a pain that casts off the light of life. As the Psalmist cries: “The enemy pursues me, he crushes me to the ground; he makes me dwell in darkness like those long dead.”

Darkness often is the realm of ignorance and folly. According to Ecclesiastes: “The wise man has eyes in his head, while the fool walks in the darkness” (2:14). John would later write: “If we claim to have fellowship with Him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth.” (1 John 1:6). That says it all!

We live in a world where people come up with some of the craziest ideas. Almost anything in religion gets credibility, from voodoo magic to fanatics who believe God wants them to strap on a bomb and die a martyr’s death. People live in darkness. Even here in Northern Virginia, where churches abound and the best education is available to everyone, folks grope about in spiritual blackness and make foolish and evil decisions that show no common sense or knowledge of God.

That’s what we see in John 8 in this debate between Jesus and the Pharisees. They are educated religious leaders, who in many ways stand out as exceptional men. But when it comes to understanding Jesus, they are in total darkness.

Jesus revealed Himself as the long-awaited Messiah. But they accuse and reject Him and try to discredit Him on the basis of some legal technicality. They say: “Here you are, appearing as your own witness; your testimony is not valid.” They base their accusation on the Old Testament law that demanded that two or three witnesses present evidence before someone be charged of a crime. They say that Jesus has no witnesses to back up what He says, so His claim as the I Am is untrue. It’s a crime.

But their complaint was really a lie. The Pharisees had seen many witnesses to Jesus’ life and ministry. John the Baptist identified Jesus as the Messiah. Nicodemus admitted, “We know that you are a teacher who comes from God.” They knew of miracles and healings and all sorts of things Jesus did – so many witnesses, in fact, that if they really wanted an answer, they had plenty of proof. But their hearts were darkened with stubborn unbelief. Even though He was standing before their very eyes, they could not see the light!

It is interesting how Jesus responds. He is God and therefore is His own witness – as the Son in complete harmony with the Father! Because He is God, Jesus can make a claim that stands on its own. His claim to be the light of the world is self-validating. It requires no proof other than Himself. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5). When a light shines, you can see. When you flick the switch in a very dark room, when the light comes on, the room is no longer dark. No debate, no explanation. The light shines.

Now the Son of God was shining there in front of them, and because of their unbelief, because they wanted a savior packaged up on their terms, according to their own way of seeing, they could not see the light of the world! Imagine someone hearing Pavarotti sing an opera and then demand to see his musical credentials or asking Einstein to present his academic transcript before lecturing on physics. We would laugh if someone demanded Joe Gibbs prove his right to speak on the subject of football.

How much more is the foolishness of the Pharisees to stand before Jesus Christ, as a human being, and demand evidence to prove who He is. That's foolish! He is God! He says His testimony is true "for I know where I came from and where I am going."

Who backs up the claims of God? God Himself! When God is present, when He comes in the flesh, when He is in the world as the Person of Jesus Christ, it is all you need. When you have seen Jesus, you have seen God. But the Pharisees would not believe. That these Pharisees reject Jesus tells us a little something about unbelief.

You see unbelief is almost never an intellectual problem. It is always a matter of the heart. The Pharisees were the great intellects of their day, with the finest education. Their hearts were darkened. They were self-satisfied and proud and would not come to a Messiah who required them to admit their need for a savior and cry out for forgiveness. They wanted a Jesus who allowed them to do what they wanted, to experience God on their own terms, in their own way, without the humility of repentance and faith. The same is true today.

Harry Ironside tells the story of a colleague of Sir Isaac Newton. This man, a scientist and intellectual, just could not bring himself to believe in Jesus. Newton, who was Christian, replied with a helpful analogy.

"Sometimes I come into my study and in my absent-mindedness I attempt to light my candle when the cover is over it. I fumble about trying to light it and cannot; but when I remove the cover then I am able to light the candle.

Newton continued:

I am afraid the cover in your case is the love of your sins; it is deliberate unbelief that is in you. Turn to God in repentance; be prepared to let the Spirit of God reveal His truth to you, and it will be His joy to show the glory of the grace of God shining in the face of Jesus Christ."

Jesus came as light to overcome darkness. He came to defeat unbelief and ignorance; He came to put away evil and fear; He came to dispel gloom and depression. He is the Light of the World.

LIGHT OF THE WORLD

We see from John 7 that Jesus said these words shortly after the Feast of Tabernacles. You may recall that this feast was celebrated by the Jews to remember God's care for them during their 40 years of wanderings through the Sinai Desert after leaving Egypt.

They celebrated this feast once a year. Each night of the celebration, after the sun went down, two great lamps were lit in the courts of the Temple. They say these lamps cast their light over every part of the city of Jerusalem. Not a single quarter in the city escaped their light. These great lamps

were meant to recall the pillar (or column) of cloud and the column of fire that had accompanied the Israelites during their 40-year wanderings in the wilderness. God dwelt in the cloud and fire. They appeared when Israel left Egypt and guided them through the Red Sea and every day of those 40 years. It gave them shade by day; and light and warmth at night. When Jesus said to the Pharisees, "I am the light of the world," He was making a claim to be the same God who was in the cloud and fire.

Pastor Peter Barnes says there were three things Jesus may have meant by this claim, three things to see beyond the darkness. They are the presence of God, the protection of God, and the guidance of God. I think he's right. What follows is taken from Pastor Barnes's comments.

First, the two great columns marked the presence of God. The fire and cloud represented the activity of God in their midst. The pillar of cloud would descend whenever Moses was to receive divine instruction and stand at the entrance of the tabernacle, where the Ark of the Covenant was kept, and there the Lord would speak to him. The people would see that great light and would stop what they were doing and worship. They were comforted by the presence of the Lord.

In the same way, Jesus as the light of the world assures us of the presence of God. He is our constant companion throughout our lives, the unseen guest at every meal, the one who listens to every conversation. Jesus told the disciples – and He tells us – that He would never leave or forsake His own . . . And you know what? He is true to His word. No matter how lonely you may feel, no matter how many people have let you down, no matter how isolated you may be today, Jesus is there right by your side. He is the light of the world and He will never leave you!

Second, because God was present, the cloud and fire was the primary way God protected Israel. Remember this story? As the Egyptian army was bearing down upon the people of Israel, the pillar of cloud moved to a position between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night, as the Israelites crossed through the Red Sea, the pillar brought darkness to the Egyptians but light to Israel. When they crossed to safety, God lifted the cloud, brought the Egyptian army into confusion, and crushed them. Jesus, the light of the world, the pillar of cloud and fire, protects us, too. Friends, there is nothing that can touch you in this life that doesn't first pass through the hands of the Lord.

Is there a problem that seems larger than life and you wonder how you are going to solve it? Are you worried about your finances, your unemployment, the results of a medical test? Are you afraid of a boss at work, a teacher at school, someone or something that might hurt you? Remember that Jesus is the light of the world . . . and He will protect you.

Finally, we see the cloud and fire as the Lord's guidance for the people of Israel. As they wandered in the wilderness, the Israelites had no clear idea about which way to get to the Promised Land. If you've ever been out in the desert, you know things can get confusing – heat produces mirages and distorts distances and makes the terrain hard to follow. But for Israel out there in the desert, God provided the cloud and the fire. When the fire and cloud moved, the people followed. When the pillars stood still, they stayed put. They did not get lost.

And Jesus, as the light of the world, is our guide today. He shows us the way out of darkness. He overcomes fear and evil. He is truth against the world of ignorance and folly. Whenever we have decisions to make, He grants us His wisdom – as we walk in the light. Brothers and sisters, we

should earnestly seek God's will whenever we make plans for the future. God loves us, and He has our best interest at heart. There is no better place to live than in the center of God's will.

Jesus brings meaning to our disappointments and depression. The dark world out there has nothing to say about suffering and sadness, except that it hurts and should be avoided. But the Light of the World brings comfort and hope, the promise that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that will come. Jesus loves you and He loves me and He bids us to cast all of our cares upon Him.

And the Light of the World stands against the sin of unbelief. Jesus is the Lord of glory, not a beggar in the make-believe courtroom of the Pharisees. When we bow the knee to His authority, He sheds His light into our souls and builds our faith.

But He does so on His terms. In an essay called "God in the Dock," C. S. Lewis described the way we often approach God today. The dock was the place in the English courtroom where the defendant stood for trial. The judge sat at the bench and the accused stood in the dock. But today, as Lewis pointed out, the roles are often reversed. We think we are the judge and God is in the dock. Today, most people will accept Jesus only on their terms, worship Him the way they want to, follow and obey Him only when they understand what He is doing.

In your unbelief, do you ever put God in the dock? When you and I submit to His light, we get it right. Our unbelief dims and His truth shines. The darkness of our unbelief and doubt is brightened by His loving and warm embrace.

CONCLUSION

There is one more thing about this light I want you to know. It is especially important as we enter Holy Week. Do you remember what happened when the Light of the World was crucified, what happened on Good Friday afternoon just before Jesus died?

Darkness covered the earth for three hours. The Son of God bowed His holy head under that darkness of judgment and because of that horrible, painful death, He can bring you and me out of darkness into His perfect light.

The Light of the World was crucified. But, on the third day, He rose from the grave, clothed in glory. The Bible tells us that He appeared in the flesh to the disciples and to more than 500 people. He then ascended into heaven and now sits at the right hand of the Father as the Light of the World. He is alive!

In the book of Revelation we see the Light standing in the midst of seven brightly lit lampstands. Among those bright lights, Jesus is the one who is noticed. His eyes are like a flame of fire, His face is like the sun shining in full strength.

Jesus is still the light of the world. He is still the One who overcomes. He overcomes the lurking shadows of fear and evil, the black gloom of depression, the foolishness of unbelief. He is the light that shines in the darkness, but the darkness cannot, Will Not, SHALL NOT overcome it.

Like those He promised on that first Palm Sunday, when we see and believe Him as the true light we will become sons of light. Jesus is the light of the world. When we follow Him we will not walk in darkness, but we will have the Light of life.