

Sermon – Pentecost Sunday
John 7:37-39, 8:12
June 4, 2017

"The Day the Light Came Down...and the Lights Went Out"

Every autumn in ancient Jerusalem, the city would be filled to overflowing with Jews celebrating the Festival of Booths or Tabernacles. The festival was intended to recall the 40 years that the people of Israel lived in tents or booths after their exodus from Egypt and were kept alive on the bread God sent them from heaven – known as “manna.” During the festival the city of Jerusalem was bathed in light every night for a week, a reminder of how God led them in the wilderness by a pillar of fire at night. Every night in the temple grounds, worshippers crowded around four enormous lamp stands, which were filled with oil and, interestingly enough, whose wicks were made from the discarded undergarments of the Jewish priests (how would like to have served on *that* altar guild)? Throughout the night, young men kept adding oil to the lamps, while older men noted for their piety sang and danced to certain psalms with as many as 8 flaming torches in their hands (gentlemen, does that suggest a dance line ministry here at CLC?)

Of course it was a brilliant sight, with all this light dancing off the white marble walls of the temple and parades of torches winding around the temple grounds like giant luminous caterpillars. It was the social event of the season. Then, just before dawn, on the seventh and final night, with the first glimmers of sunlight creeping up over the Mount of Olives, the priests would silence the people, and they would turn their backs to the east in order to declare their faith in God. This recalled how their ancestors once worshipped sun gods, but now Israel worshipped the true God. Finally, in accord with Psalm 119:105 which says *"thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path"*, the priests would go inside the temple and remove the sacred scrolls from the ark of the covenant, which at one time held the original stone tablets of the 10 Commandments. The scrolls would be replaced by a single candle, and the priests would pray this prayer; *"O Lord of the universe, you command us to light the lamps to you, yet you are the Light of the World"*

Sometime during this seventh and final night of the festival, according to our lesson from John, Jesus the Christ made his way into the temple grounds. He had been teaching there off and on for a few days, but he was never one to miss a dramatic setting for his teaching, and this final night was it. Situating himself near one of the great lamp stands, which were erected near the temple treasury where people would make their offerings, he began to address the crowd, saying; *"I AM....the Light of the World"*. Then pausing, perhaps to survey the stunned faces of the people, or perhaps to watch with amazement all those old men still winding their way about the area with torches in their hands, Jesus added *"whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life"*. I AM, Jesus said as night gave way to day. I am all that you commemorate... I AM all that you anticipate....I AM light and truth....so follow me.

In this passage from John, Jesus makes two distinct claims; the first of which non-Jews can fairly easily accept. Jesus is the light of the world. Only the most cynical or atheistic minds today would not accept that Jesus had some pretty good values and morals and perspectives on life, so granting him "light" status (as in “enlightened thinking”), is fine so long as he remains only one of history’s many "enlightened thinkers".

It's the second part of his statement that makes the troublesome claim....because it is a statement directed not at Jesus but us. "*Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but have the light of life*". He'd earlier said that "*from him streams of living water would flow*" – a reference to the streams that God made flow in the desert for 40 years to keep Israel alive after the Exodus. These are not mere comparisons Jesus is making – he is claiming he is God - the protector and provider of Israel, and his words messed mightily with the beliefs of the people – suggesting he now replaced all the ritual folks had come to know and love. But it cuts the same way in us, because Jesus' call would replace just about all of the practices and attitudes that have way more influence over us than we would like to think.

Admit it, we guard our lives intensely. The proliferation of social media has created in us the opportunity and need to “manicure our images” so that we always seem happy. Stories that employers troll social media all the time has convinced anyone who might ever want a job that we need to create of our online profile “*highlight reels of success and good character*”. The ubiquitous status updates - posting of “*what I'm up to*” often entices us to make sure it looks fun and includes all the right people - whether I am or not and has even created a phenomena called “FOMO” or “the fear of missing out.” All this is an endless and at times vicious cycle of building a life and consciously or unconsciously projecting an image of ourselves. In other words, it's all an attempt to put *ourselves* in the best possible light. But Jesus Christ says the only image that matters is his, and the only light worth being seen in... is the light of his grace and truth. I ask you, who really needs another short lived or self-constructed and artificial version of what the world calls the "limelight" - when Jesus Christ calls you to walk in something he called the true light?

Pentecost is remembered most for its tongues of fire which symbolized the very light that illuminated that Jewish festival at which Jesus proclaimed himself “*the Light of the World.*” Early Christian teachers used talk about how a blacksmith could hold a piece of iron in the fire until it glowed – until that once cold piece of metal took on some of the properties of fire itself. In the words of one of those great teachers - Athanasius, we can by the power of the Holy Spirit, “*become by grace what God is by nature.*”

Well, I John 1:5 says; “*God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all.*” That's a pretty lofty claim folks. But I John 1:7 says; “*If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin.*” Folks that's a pretty tall promise you live under. You, we, the church, are God's “Plan A” for the world, and there is no “Plan B”. Our privilege, your privilege, and task is to bear an image, not build one. To put it another way, our privilege and task is to come together like we've done again today, remember what God on a day called Pentecost once did, and then be ready for whatever it is God through might do next. AMEN