

This annual feast was inaugurated to help the Israelites remember that for 40 years they wandered in the wilderness before they finally entered the Promised Land. During this seven-day celebration, the entire nation camped out in booths. People would eat their meals in them, and some would sleep in them. They were made of branches and leaves to remind the people of the hardships their ancestors endured in the wilderness.¹

The Feast of Tabernacles was a happy, joyous holiday and the Israelites would sing and dance, remembering God's glory among them, as God traveled as a cloud during the day and fire at night. The celebration also focused on the promise of God sending a light, the Anointed One, the Messiah, who would free them from bondage. Sacrifices were offered and scriptures like Isaiah 9:2 were read: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shined." (Isaiah 9:2) It's one of the first lessons we read in the Lessons and Carols service on Christmas Eve.

On the final night of the Feast of Tabernacles, the candelabras were extinguished and there was darkness. The lights were extinguished because God had not yet sent the Savior. The Temple grew dark. The tents or booths were torn down. So that's where we find Jesus – a participant at the Feast of Tabernacles. John 7:37 tells us – "On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink.'" (John 7:37).

That brings us to the moment we have this morning in our scripture. The next morning Jesus enters the Temple. He's surrounded by people and stands up and declares he is the Messiah, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." (John 8:12). Imagine the scene! In the very court where the lighting ceremony took place, after a night of darkness, Jesus stands beneath the 16 bowls of oil that had been extinguished in the ceremony the night before and says he is the light of the whole world.

When Jesus announces himself to be the light of the world that never goes out, there is backlash. The announcement doesn't go well. The Pharisees rightly understand Jesus' intended meaning that he is God. An argument ensues that is recorded in the verses we read. Jesus' response makes a second radical claim. He not only says that he is the Messiah but says he has a witness and then calls God as that witness. Jewish tradition and law demanded that not only must a witness be valid, but testimony could only stand up when there were two or more witnesses. The witnesses in this impromptu trial before the Pharisees then are Jesus and God – not too shabby of a witness pool to have on the stand on your behalf.

Light means so many things for us. We travel by light. We organize almost every activity by our ability to see what light shows us. We've harnessed light in the form of lasers to heal in the medical profession. Light has the amazing ability to show us what we would never otherwise experience. Light also indicates understanding. To be enlightened means that we understand. Think of what we would be if we had never been introduced to knowledge or understanding or ideas? Those who do not allow themselves to be enlightened fall behind. Any student in school can tell you that. That's my message to graduates this day – your learning is just beginning – keep learning or you will fall behind.

This is also one of the thrusts of John's gospel, a gospel aimed at Greeks who thought themselves to be already enlightened. Yet Greeks were in what the Bible calls darkness. Another word for darkness is confusion. Greek philosophy didn't acknowledge the sovereignty of God. Paul says that without light from God, people fall into the darkness of confusion and do only what they feel like doing – whether it is satisfying an urge or appetite or following a trend or tradition.

Have you ever found yourself stumbling in the dark? The power has gone out in the storm, the flashlight has dimmed, the batteries finally failed, and there you are in the attic or basement groping your way around. Think of what it would mean to drive anywhere at night without headlights or streetlights? Without light, it is hard to carry on things we take for granted. In all of our "I AM" sayings, Jesus will take a common metaphor – bread last week, light this week – and move from the physical aspect to the spiritual. Jesus is talking about more than lighting our path when we physically can't see what's ahead. He's gone from the physical to the spiritual and that's the message he has for them hearing the words for the first time and for us.

"Whoever follows me will never walk in the darkness..." The idea of following Jesus is always revealed in the New Testament as a radical idea. The disciples left everything to follow Him. Here in this text, we discover the idea that one who follows Jesus will never walk in darkness. He calls us to follow Him—it is radical discipleship. Even when it feels like our life is in total darkness, light is there because Jesus is there.

Darkness was the beginning of things for a lot of people who God called to do great things. In the darkness of a dungeon, Joseph received his commission and became a government official. In the darkness of midnight, Gideon realized his identity and became an invincible warrior. In the darkness of a fish's belly, Jonah reconciled with God and became a missionary. In the darkness of insomnia, Samuel recorded God's voice and

became a prophet. In the darkness of a lion's den, Daniel recognized God and became an evangelist to royalty. In the darkness of the tomb, Lazarus was resurrected and became an example of new life in Jesus. In the darkness of blind eyes, Paul resolved to live for Christ. Through the darkness of death and a tomb, Jesus rose to rescue humanity.

A famous painting hangs in St. Paul's Cathedral in London. It is called the "Light of the World." It is a picture of Jesus knocking at the door. Because this picture was hanging in a place near some busy roads, it got dusty and began to lose its color. The Cathedral authorities decided to get it cleaned. When the art specialist took it out of the frame and shined a light on it, they saw some words that no one was intended to read. The artist had written many years earlier, "Forgive me, Lord Jesus, that I kept you waiting at the door so long." He had known about Jesus but waited a long, long time before responding to the invitation. The light had shown up these words; and in the end, he sent the message to thousands who gazed upon the picture. It was good that these few words were brought to the light.²

Many times, in our spiritual life, we want spotlights to illuminate our entire journey ahead before we make a move but life isn't like that. Stormie Omartian authored a book entitled, *Just Enough Light for The Step I'm On*. In it, she describes how we want to have a clearer knowledge of God's plans for our lives. But God, in God's grace, mercy, and wisdom, prevents us from seeing and knowing too much. Many times, if we knew what the entire staircase looked like, we'd never take the first step. We need only to let God's light in Jesus Christ enter our hearts and then we find that God provides just enough – just enough light for the step we're on.³

Light is a symbol of hope. A person lost in a dark cave turns a corner and is relieved to see a ray of sunlight breaking through a crack. A person adrift on a life raft in the middle of the ocean at night is excited when they can say, "I see the light of a ship on the horizon."

People in darkness are delighted to see a light. It's hope. In John 12:46 Jesus said, "I have come into the world as a light so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness." (John 12:46). The world in which we live is engulfed in darkness, and people are groping to find a way out. But Jesus said, "I am the light of the world." The attributes of light reflect the hopeful impact that the light of Jesus Christ still makes on our lives today.

Wherever there is light, there is the anticipation of what's ahead. Wherever there is light, there is healing. Wherever there is light, there is acceptance. Wherever there is light, there is Christ's grace and love. When Jesus says, "I

AM the light of the world," he is calling to us to be a people who are healed, people who have the light and share the light. Most of you have been to a Christmas Eve service here in this place. You know that, near the end of the service, all the lights go out. There is total darkness. Then, one candle, the Christ candle on the Advent Wreath is lighted. Every year, I am amazed, after being in total darkness, at the light that Christ candle can make. The light of Christ is powerful in darkness. But then, something even greater happens. Christ's light moves into the congregation. I have a picture of the 2019 Christmas Eve service as my screensaver on my computer at home. I've kept this picture up every time I power on my computer because it has inspired me during these last 14 months that we will be back together, shoulder to shoulder again proclaiming that we have the light of Christ in us.

But it's not just on Christmas Eve. Take seriously your identity as a child of light, do something today that reflects the light of God. It might be something simple – or, it might be something big. However, you do it, do it today and tomorrow, and the next day and the next. Allow Jesus to be your light and allow the light of Christ that is in you to find expression each and every day.

¹ Background on Feast of Tabernacles found in "I Am the Light of the World" by Michael Deutsch. May 10, 2020 found at www.sermoncentral.com.

² Story of St. Paul's "Light of the World Painting found here - <https://www.catholicjournal.us/2015/09/28/the-light-of-the-world/>

³ Information on Stormie Omartian can be found on her website – www.stormieomartian.com