

I AM the light of the world

Sermon 2 in series: I AM the transforming promises of our Savior

Sunday, February 24, 2008

Rev. David Tinney

Text: John 9:1-12

Theme: Jesus is the light breaking into the darkest areas of our lives revealing our sins, exposing our doubts, and destroying our fears so we might be transformed into Children of Light.

The story goes there was a woman who was stark naked and just about to climb into her shower when her doorbell rang. She hollered, "Who is it?" The man at the door shouted back, "It's the blind man." She figured it was safe, so she opened the door. He looked at her and in shock asked, "Where do you want me to hang these blinds?"

This morning we are going to be talking about Christ healing a blind man but I think down deep inside it was another kind of blind man than the man in the joke. Today I am going to continue my sermon series entitled "I AM the transforming promises of our Savior" with Christ's powerful statement "I AM the light of the world." As I said on the first Sunday of this series these I am statements are only found in the gospel of John and they are creative disclosures by our Savior revealing who he is and what his role was in coming to humankind.

The "I AM" combination occurs 29 times in the book of John compared to only a half dozen times in the other gospels combined. So the author uses it to get our attention. Every time we see the combination it ought to sound an alarm that Jesus is about to reveal a new insight about his character, mission, and relationship with God. There are seven classic statements that are linked to common, everyday images that would have resonated with the average person living in Palestine in Jesus' day. Those images include water, bread, life, door, vine, shepherd, and the image we are going to be talking about today – light.

This "I am statement" is so important for John that he repeats it in two different settings. In chapter 8 Jesus has just forgiven the woman caught in adultery and the Pharisees are upset with him for forgiving her and setting up a new standard of judgment. He states, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." This is a statement that challenges their authority and is downright offensive. Their version of this statement would read, "Whoever follows the LAW will never walk in darkness, but will have life." By this "I am statement" Jesus is setting himself above the Law and on equal footing with God.

One chapter later we have our reading for this morning where Jesus encounters a man blind since birth and he heals him but not before making the statement again, "As long as I am in this world, I am the light of the world." If I were a Pharisee and would have heard Christ make this statement I would have probably said to myself then let me find a way to get you out of this world. In the Gospel of John the image of light brings new life, heals both spiritual and physical blindness, reveals sins, and breaks the hold of darkness. It is a powerful image and Jesus makes a powerful claim.

Let's look again at today's story. Jesus and the disciples are walking in Jerusalem in the area around the Temple when Jesus sees a blind man. He must have been a fixture in the area because it is common knowledge that he has been blind since birth. This is the only story in all the gospels that makes the distinction that this is a congenital illness and it raises the question by his followers of who was responsible. In this period of Judaism there was a lot of concern about inherited sin and there was a belief that if someone had a birth defect then it was a result of the sin of one of the parents.

Jesus does not spend a lot of time assigning blame because for Jesus there is no blame to be assigned. Instead he says that “he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” This is a dangerous passage because it can easily be misinterpreted to show that God inflicts birth defects and suffering on innocent people just to later reveal God’s power or mercy. I prefer another interpretation of the text. The man being born blind is part of our human condition. It is part of genetics, or problems at birth, or a whole host of other possibilities. God did not cause it to prove himself later. But God uses the canvas of this person’s life for a masterpiece of redemption. This would be consistent with what God does in all of our lives.

What we don’t realize right off the bat is this man’s blindness since birth is very similar to the state of all humankind. Each of us is blind to the power and presence of God until Jesus, the light of the world, reveals himself in the fullness of his glory. Each of us is blinded in the darkness of our own sin, pride, and fear until Christ comes as the light and frees us. The focus may be on this blind beggar but it is our story.

Now we move into the fun part of the story. Jesus sees the need and a chance to drive home the ideas of light versus dark and spiritual versus physical blindness and he gets creative and perhaps disgusting in how he heals. He creates a mud ball out of spit and clay and puts it into this man’s eyes. I don’t know about you but I am glad they didn’t teach this lesson of healing in seminary because I think I would have skipped it. So he puts the mud balls in his eyes and then tells him to walk over to the Pool of Siloam and wash it out.

I was telling the evening Disciple group that I took a course once in healing and there is no pattern or formula to what Jesus does. We know that all he had to do was say the words, or touch him, or even silently pray over him and he could have been healed. But no – he has him walk across the courtyard some 500 yards to the pool with mud balls in his eyes. Why?

I believe it was to call attention to those who were questioning. I believe that it was not so much about the walk to the pool as the walk back when the sighted friends and neighbors could not believe what they were seeing and started making excuses and accusations. The blind beggar stands in contrast to those around him. He starts to witness to the Light of the World and the sighted ones become blinded by the light.

Light threatens darkness. Light breaks through the dark areas of our lives and destroys our fear, exposes our sins and reveals our doubts. Light – especially the Light of the World – is the greatest weapon we have against the encroaching darkness of our lives.

Let me tell you a true story that happened a few weeks ago. Jason – not his real name – was having a tough morning. He had been out on a drunken binge all night trying to forget the problems created from the night before and the night before that. His girlfriend had kicked him out, his father had locked him out, and he was sleeping in the backseat of a car that he couldn’t drive because he would rather buy booze than gas. So that is what he did. He walked to the local market to get a six pack of malt and settled down in the bushes around our church in order to welcome in a new day.

As he broke open the first bottle something stopped him. For some reason all the years of elbow-bending, wrist-tipping training suddenly collapsed. The strangeness continued. He hid his bottles in the bushes and walked to our church and tried to find the right door to enter. He said that after five doors he finally came to the office and asked to see the pastor. It was one of those days when I had back-to-back-to-back activities but something told me that I needed to meet with him. So he came into my office for a talk.

Jason told me his brief drunken history and how he had a six-pack of salvation waiting in the bushes and then asked me to explain why he was here in my office. He had walked by our church hundreds of times before and used our bushes to drink and sleep in when he was in trouble with his family. Why all of a sudden had he felt the urge to come to the church and see me?

So I started asking questions hoping to find a crack into his soul. For a long time it was a game to him of dodge ball but finally one of the questions found its mark. Light had broken through the darkness of his soul. In that moment, with just a sliver of light coming through, he was able to see the accumulated mess of his life but also something bright enough, bold enough, and powerful enough to transform his darkness.

It was the first step of a long day. By the end of that day he had met with two recovering alcoholics and put himself in a rehab center for the first time in his life. He is still battling his demons but he is not alone now and he is turning to a higher power to help him through the darkness of his addictions.

That is what the Light of the World does for us. It is more than a metaphor it is a transforming power. Christ's light seeks a crack in our souls and then comes streaming in exposing our pride, our need for control, our greed, our dishonesty, our lack of forgiveness, and our fears. It allows us to see the residue of sinful behavior but shines as a beacon towards new life and new habits. It heals us of our spiritual blindness and enables us to stand with the beggar of the ancient story and say with confidence and authority "Lord I believe in you."

Sounds so easy doesn't it? You would think with all the power of the light, all the potential of change brought by the light, all of the promises of becoming children of the light that we would be throwing open the shutters of our soul and begging that light to come in. But text after text, scripture after scripture, and human story human after story confirms the opposite. Sometimes the light is too bright. Sometimes it reveals too much. Sometimes it demands too much.

You see not only are we to be changed by the light but we are to be the light to the world changing it. You and I are called by the Great I AM to be children of light transforming the darkness around us and redeeming our world.

Let me end with a story that is obviously more of a parable than a true event, but it points the way to how reluctant we are to be the witness in our world. There was a woman once who wanted peace in the world and peace in her heart, but she was very frustrated. The world seemed to be falling apart and her personal life wasn't that great either. One day she decided to go shopping, and she went to the mall and walked in to one of the stores. She was surprised to see Jesus behind the counter. She knew it was Jesus because he looked just like the paintings she'd seen in museums and in devotional books.

Finally she got up her nerve and asked, "Excuse me, but are you Jesus?"

"I am," the man behind the counter replied.

"Do you work here?"

"In a way you could say that," Jesus chuckled, "you see I own the store."

"Oh, what do you sell here?"

"Just about everything," Jesus replied. "Feel free to walk up and down the aisles, make a list, see what it is you want, and then come back and I'll see what I can do for you."

Well, she did just that. She walked up and down the aisles, writing furiously. She found peace on earth on sale and included in the package deal was no hunger and no poverty. In the family section she found harmony, understanding, compassion, and wholeness. In the healing section she found the cures

to cancer, Alzheimer's, AIDS, and many others. In the resource section she found clean air, water, and earth. She found companies committed to saving rather than raping the environment.

By the time she got back to the counter, she had a long list. Jesus looked over the list, then smiled at her and said, "No problem." And then he bent down behind the counter and picked out all sorts of things, and finally stood up, and laid four items out on the counter.

"What are these?" the woman asked.

"A lamp, wick, some matches, and oil," Jesus answered. "This is a light store."

"You mean I don't get the finished product?"

"No, this is a place of dreams. You come and see what it looks like, and I give you the light and the lamp to go break through the darkness and cast away the shadows that hold back the truth. You take this lamp home and let it shine in your family and see the changes it will make. You take this lamp into your office next week and let it shine and see what changes it brings to how you do business. You take this lamp into your community and watch what the light will do. You will soon find all those things you saw on the shelf.

"Oh," she said, and she left the store without buying anything.

LET US PRAY...