

BELPRES  CHURCH

Sermon Title: Light of the World

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Scripture:

John 1:5-10

⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

⁶There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

⁹The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.

Transcript:

Well, if we haven't met before, my name is Becky Bastein, and I work with our elementary kids, usually up in the upper campus, and it's so fun to be here this morning with you guys. A couple of years ago, my husband and I were looking to buy a house. And if any of you have ever looked for a house, you know you sort of make that list of things that you're looking for. It might have how many bedrooms, the yard size, what's the commute to work? Well, we bought our house the very first week of March 2020. So a lot of those things ended up not being very important for a while, but as we looked at our list, as I look back, there's something that I would've had on that list that I didn't know we should be looking at. We were first time house owners, we were new, and that was how the power grid or the power lines in our neighborhood were. Things we just didn't think to ask.

But we soon came to realize that any amount of weather anywhere in the state of Washington could lead to a power outage at our house. Rain, wind, snow, sun, extreme heat, wind over in Spokane, all could lead to a power outage at our house any day of the week, absolutely. You can imagine this made working from home a little bit interesting at times, and also led to some crazy looking for phone chargers anytime it was windy at all. Well, after our first winter, I started to notice this funny thing happening in me, where I had this wild appreciation for any time we were able to do anything with electricity, anything at all. Was I able to do a load of laundry uninterrupted on a windy day? Time to celebrate. Was my husband able to cook a pot roast on a snowy day without us having to do the back a plan of taking it outside to the grill? What a relief. Who knew that reading without a flashlight would cause us to celebrate? Or being able to defrost meat when you forget to de-thought in your microwave would be a sign for dancing in our kitchen together.

Well, we came to have this wild appreciation for something because we were so used to having it not be there. And in the same way, I think that I have come to have this deeper and deeper appreciation for the light of Jesus through the times that I've walked through difficulty or darkness, especially over the last few years.

Today's text talks about Jesus as the light of the world, and a light that I have come to appreciate definitely over the last two years. And as we're coming out of this season of Advent and Christmas, I think that some of us, especially those of us living in the Pacific Northwest, can appreciate that this winter sometimes feels dark. And sometimes our world

feels dark. And sometimes we start to have more appreciation for the light of Jesus because of the world that we're walking in.

But I also think that it's true each year, at least for me, as I move out of the Christmas season, I need to remind myself to draw near to Jesus. It's easy when the trees are lit and we have special worship through music services to feel close to God, those advent devotionals end, and then I have to remind myself to draw near to God every single day. So today I want to talk about that, how we continue to draw near to the light of the world, even as the holiday ends. How do we continue to be people who draw near to Emanuel, Jesus with us?

So, step one, we see in the text, John referred to Jesus as the true light of the world. And I think this is an important distinction for any of us who are trying to see Jesus in our life and in our world, because we want to know who's the true light?

Working with our kids, one of the common questions that I get is how do you know when God is talking to you? How do you know when it's God who's talking to you, and not just you, who's talking to you? Now, our kids ask this question, but I think this is a question that all of us wonder throughout our whole lives. And the best way that I know is to draw near to God and to get to know his voice, and knowing that voice will help me to hear it in the world and in my life.

Now, on Wednesday nights, we sometimes do this program with our elementary kids. And at the end of the night, the kids are in the gym and they're usually playing a really loud ruckus game of dodgeball at the end of the night, as their parents come to pick them up. And I stand at the door and I have a microphone. And when the parents come, I say their kids' name so their kid can come and be dismissed.

And I've noticed that on occasion, sometimes, if the game's just really fun, kids seem to not quite hear me when I call their name, but I've come up with this system for when that happens. Here's what I do. I take the mic, and after I've said their name, I hand it to mom or dad and I say, "Hey, will you say their name?" And even if the mom or dad is a little timid and shy because I've just handed them this big microphone and they don't want to be loud, and they whisper their kid's name into that microphone, it always seems that their kid can hear them.

Why? Because they know that voice. They know that voice so well, they could pick it out in a crowd better than any other voice. That's the voice that's woken them up every morning, and helped them with homework, and is the voice that's called their name thousands and thousands of times, and so they hear that voice. Their ears pick it up.

And in the same way, when I have spent time in worship and prayer, and singing God's praises, I seem to know his voice just as well. I can pick it up in the world and I can see that light in my life. I recognize it because when we spend time with someone, we get to know the sound of their voice.

Now, a second way that I have found it incredibly useful to see the light of God's life in my life is to look for the small places. And I say small, but I really mean seemingly small, small by our perspective of where God is at work.

There was a Dutch theologian and priest named Henri Nouwen, and he said this, "I keep expecting loud and impressive events to convince me and others of God's saving power. Our temptation is to be distracted by them. When I have no eyes for the small signs of God's presence, the smile of a baby, the carefree play of children, the words of encouragement and gestures of love offered by friends, I will always remain tempted to despair." I feel this. When we are looking for God in our world, I think it's easy to look for those sort of big miraculous things. Where is a Red Sea parting? Or if a donkey talked to me, I would know that's God, no question about it. Where are the miracles? Where's the angel coming to tell me, "Becky, this is what you should do next?" But in reality, God speaks to us very purposefully, sometimes in big, loud ways, and sometimes in quiet, humble ways, and they're both important.

So I have to pause and look around for what God might be doing in my life. Just a few weeks ago on a Sunday morning, Laura and I were getting ready for Sunday school. And just at the last moment, we had a teacher call out sick. And because of the numbers of teachers we had, we realized we would have to combine classes, which isn't a terrible thing, but isn't what we want to do either. As you can imagine, second graders and third graders want to do their own thing, but we decided we would combine and that was fine. And I was literally turning around to go make a sign to clarify the new room assignments, when our office door opened. And I just felt something in my heart from God say, "Listen to this," because you see, in my mind, it was way too late. It was just minutes before the service, there was no way we were going to find somebody else to step into that room.

But the door opened and in walked a dad, a dad who teaches Sunday school for us regularly. So his background checked, ready to go, awesome teacher, but just wasn't scheduled that week. But something in him had heard from God that maybe he should go ask us, "Do you need help this morning? Is there a gap that you need to be filled?" Just moments after we got the cancellation phone call.

And you see, on a Sunday morning, I can be busy. I am running around trying to do everything, and if I don't pause and slow down, and know what God is providing for us, I could miss it. But in the small things, God shows up and shines His light in our life. So friends, once we've seen that light, once we have seen it in our life, what do we do? The next step is letting it into our lives. John tells us that this light of Jesus lights up the darkness, and if you can picture bringing a light into a dark room, you know that it changes that darkness, it transforms it. And in the same way, when the light of God comes into our life, it transforms who we are.

Now, I will be honest with you. I was hesitant to talk at all about the way God transforms us just a couple of days after New Year's because of the way in which our culture thinks about transformation and New Year's Eve resolutions. So I want to be really clear, the Bible here isn't telling us that we would be more worthy of God, of God's love, if we just exercised, got organized, read the right self-help book, got good grades. Not one of those things impacts how much God loves us, but when we let His love into our life, it might transform how we see the world and who we are.

A Christmas movie that I revisit every couple of years is The Polar Express. I imagine many of you have read the classic book or seen the movie, but if you haven't, the general premise is a bunch of kids get on a train headed to the North Pole on Christmas Eve, and they all have an adventure, and an adventure where they clearly need to learn something. But the main character is a young boy, who for a variety of reasons has just come to wonder if Christmas is for him. He's not sure that he believes in all this magic and wonder that his family talks about for the Christmas season. And once they arrive at the North Pole, they are surrounded by a magical world, and the other kids are in awe of what they see around them. The gorgeous tree lights, the reindeer, the presence, they are just in awe.

But our main character, the young boy, all he can focus on is these silver bells that he can no longer hear the sound of. And he shakes it in his ear, unable to hear the sound. All the

other kids can hear it. They're talking about how beautiful the noise is, but it isn't until our character looks around and really takes in the magic and wonder of where he is, that he suddenly changes. All of a sudden, he can hear that sound.

We can be surrounded by the work of God and not let it come into our heart. We can be surrounded by it and miss it. I don't know if any of you have had this experience, but I grew up in the Pacific Northwest, just locally here, and sometimes I miss how beautiful of a place we live in. The mountains, the rivers, the sound, being able to hop on a ferry, are all things that I can take for granted if I'm not looking for it.

But when I take the time to be impressed by the beauty of the place God made for us to live, it transforms who I am, it changes my perspective, and it isn't just with creation that this happens. When I take the time to let it sink in what God is doing around me, it transforms who I am and how I see the world.

Now finally, step three, when we see this light of God and we have let it into our lives, John tells us to testify to the light. Now, I don't know about you, but sometimes that sounds like the scariest part of scripture, telling other people about our faith. Well, for much of 2020, we did kids' worship up in that balcony, looking at a camera, and every single Sunday we would come in and we would have the same kind of conversations. We would talk about how kids must be at home, worshiping on their couches and at their kitchen tables, or maybe in their cars on their way to a park.

And we would have these conversations over and over again, because honestly, it was a little bit strange to be leading kids' worship like a news reporter to a camera without a kid in the building. You can imagine. Well, every time that I would start to feel a little bit discouraged, wondering, "Is anybody really watching us at home, or has everybody given up?" I would get an email or a text from a family.

It might be a video of kids doing hand motions on their living room floor, or it might be a picture of a family doing a craft we had sent home that went with the lesson. And I got a lot of messages from people like you in our congregation who didn't even have kids, but who would stay on to worship with us. What an incredible blessing.

All of these were so encouraging because they were testifying to what God was doing, and that God was able to move in living rooms and kitchens, and hallways and front yards, and cars, even when we weren't able to meet together as a church. So we tell our story because we never know who could be impacted by hearing what God is doing in our life.

I end up telling a lot of my story in stores. You see, with my job, I often end up with odd grocery lists. You can imagine. 50 pool noodles, 20 boxes of jello, 300 candy canes. These are all real examples. And people in stores just can't help themselves. They just look at my cart and they're like, "What are you doing? Or why would anyone need that much jello?" And I always have this moment of wondering if I should tell the truth because you never know how someone's going to react to the truth, especially the truth is that we were going to make giant kitty pools full of jello and then let kids do a race, and then dig things out of the jello. It's just a little weird. Nonetheless, telling them that I work for a church and hearing what they think about that.

But I often hear God in my heart encouraging me to be honest, and so I am. I say, "I work for this church and I work with kids, and we're having this game or event, and we just want kids to have so much fun, and to know that they're welcome at our church." And sometimes people just kind of nod and walk away. It's not usually the response they were expecting from me, but other times more than once, it's led to a little bit more conversation. Somebody might tell me, "Wow, that's so cool that your church wants kids to feel welcome." Maybe they grew up in a church that didn't feel that way. Or maybe they ask about how I ended up in this career and they want to know what it takes to be a pastor. These conversations could be the beginning of something. I have no idea. They could be beginning to wonder about this God who led that lady to buy all of that jello, or to wonder if they want to find a church that sounds like the one that I've described. All I can do is testify to what God has called me to do, and let him do the rest.

So friends, as we go into a few more months of Pacific Northwest winter, bring with you the light of the world. A classic song we sing with the kids is This Little Light Of Mine. It's a song Christians have sung for years and years, because it is a simple song that many of us know the words to, because it's true, and an important reminder.

The words say, "This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine. Let it shine, let it shine. Let it shine. Everywhere I go, I'm going to let it shine." It's one of my favorite songs that we teach

kids because it reminds us that God can shine through any of us, no matter how young or how old we are. If we've known God for decades or days, God can shine in us. And it also reminds us that we can bring God's light with us out into the world. Wherever we go, we walk with him. So as we go into the new year, let's do just that. Look for the light of the world, let it into our lives, and testify to what God has done in our lives.

Let's pray. Jesus, light of the world. It is your light that we want in our lives. You light up the darkness and you light up our lives. Help us to draw near to your light and your love in the coming year, so that we would know you better and be transformed by you. We ask for the courage to let your light shine from each one of us, in Jesus name we pray. Amen.

Discussion Questions: John 1:5-10

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Questions:

- Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage and sermon?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions - *Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:*

- How have you been connecting with Jesus over the Advent and Christmas season?
- How do you see Jesus as a light in the world?
- How do you know Jesus as the true light?
- What does it look like to let Jesus' light into our lives?
- How can we testify to Jesus in our lives?

Closing Question and Application:

- Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week?
- Who might you share this with?

Closing Group Prayer:

- Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.
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