

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(December 9, 2018)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Immanuel - God with Us

The Light of the World

(The Bible, Light, and Jesus)

Study #1

Introduction: Hey, it's dark in there...

A couple of months ago, Kathy and I took our San Antonio grandchildren (ages 10, 8, 4) on a grand adventure to "The Cave Without a Name" up in Boerne.

"The Cave Without a Name" is a neat little cave system with all the stalactites and stalagmites you could hope for.

At the start of the tour, you walk down a bunch of steps into a cool, clammy wide-open area with weird limestone formations, small pools of water, a running stream - and ropes to keep visitors away from the fragile landscape.

Near the end of the hour-long tour, our guide sat all five of us down on a bench and told us to get ready for a shock. She was about to turn off the lights.

We all sat close together and braced ourselves. She flipped a switch and we were instantly transported into a world devoid of light. It was so dark you could feel it.

Not "dark" like being outside with the moon and the stars. And not like it is when you turn off the light at night in your bedroom. No matter how long the lights stayed off in that cave, our eyes never would have adjusted. There was no light to adjust to.

Now, I had been in caves before and I knew this drill. I thought it was kinda neat. The kids did too, for a few seconds. But they soon found it unnerving and were more than ready for the lights to go back on. They all preferred the light to the dark.

I suspect we're all pretty much like my grandchildren. We prefer light. If we were to turn off the lights here, you'd like it for a bit. But, you'd soon want the lights back on.

Given our preference for light, you and I are living in a very fortunate era. While candles and lanterns have been around for a long time, this last century and a half is the only time in human history when we have had light "on demand."

In times past, active living was relegated to daytime hours. As recently as America's Civil War (1860's), reading at night was still by candlelight.

We're all thankful for Mr. Edison's invention of the light bulb and light "on demand" when we need it.

It turns out that we come by this preference for light honestly. The Bible tells us that God also prefers light to dark. That was clear at the very beginning as Moses described God's creative work.

The Dark Side

Before the Beginning - Dark (Gen. 1)

[Genesis 1:1] In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. [2] The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters.

Before the beginning - a thought will give you a brain cramp! - there was nothing.

No people. No animals. No earth. No gravity. Everything was a formless void. The non-existent universe was empty. And it was dark. Cave Without a Name dark.

You can't "picture" the scene that existed prior to Genesis 1:1. There was nothing to picture. Into this nothingness, God uttered His first creative words - **[Genesis 1:3]... "Let there be light!"**

Instantly, there was light, and **[4] God saw that the light was good.**

He then separated the light from the darkness and set the stage for a continuing, daily battle between light and dark.

Every afternoon, dark begins to overpower the light. Every night, dark wins. And every morning, light emerges victorious and rules the day.

From creation forward, God repeatedly showed His preference for light over darkness.

The Curse of Darkness (Ex. 10)

After four hundred years of slavery in Egypt, God told His servant Moses to go to Pharaoh with a message: **"Let My people go!"**

Of course, Pharaoh wasn't about to release his Jewish slaves, so God sent plagues on Pharaoh and on Egypt. Each plague was, in some way or other, more severe than the one before.

The first eight plagues were terrible, consisting of bloody rivers, infestations of frogs and insects and locusts, the death of livestock and crops, with sore boils breaking out all over the Egyptians. It was terrible.

Still, Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let the Jews go free. Then, God sent the ninth plague, the plague of thick darkness.

Evidently, God determined that for a nation to be enveloped in thick cave-like darkness was about as bad as it could get. He blessed the Hebrews with light while He plagued the Egyptians with dark.

After the tenth and final plague (the worst), Pharaoh did set the Jews free. They left Egypt and fled eastward, only to be pursued by the Egyptians after Pharaoh changed his mind.

Stumbling in the Dark (Exodus 13-14)

Protection (Exodus 13-14)

As Israel was fleeing Egypt, God protected them with a barrier against the Egyptians who pursued them all the way to the Red Sea.

But the protection wasn't a barbed-wire fence or angels with swords. He protected them with light in the form of a pillar of fire.

[Exodus 13:21] The Lord was going before them in a pillar of cloud by day to lead them on the way, and in a pillar of fire by night to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night... [14:20] So it came between the camp of Egypt and the camp of Israel; and there was the cloud along with the darkness, yet it gave light at night. Thus the one did not come near the other all night.

This pillar of fire/light protected the Jews from enemies who would have destroyed them.

Guidance (Psalm 78:14)

That same pillar led the people throughout forty years of wilderness wanderings.

[Psalm 78:14] Then He led them with the cloud by day And all the night with a light of fire.

Everywhere the Jews went during their time in the desert they were led by this pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. When the pillar moved, they moved. Where the pillar led, they followed. When the pillar stayed still, they encamped.

So...

- light **freed** them for movement during the plagues on Egypt;
- light **protected** them from Egypt's attacks;
- light **guided** them on their journeys.

Clearly, in the physical, material world, light is better than the dark. But, as is the case in all great literature, the Bible often portrays *good* and *evil* by the symbols of *light* and *dark*.

Listen to the way the Apostle John describes the scene at the end of the Last Supper, after Judas Iscariot and the other disciples had eaten the Passover meal with Jesus on the night before He died.

Dark - Literal and Symbolic (John 13)

[John 13:27] After the morsel, Satan then entered into [Judas]. Therefore Jesus said to him, "What you do, do quickly." [28] Now no one of those reclining at the table knew for what purpose He had said this to him. [29] For some were supposing, because Judas had the money box, that Jesus was saying to him, "Buy the things we have need of for the feast"; or else, that he should give something to the poor. [30] So after receiving the morsel he went out immediately; and it was night.

It's important to note that final observation from John.

Of course, the sun had set and it was well past ten o'clock pm. But John's point in mentioning that it was "**night**" is that it was **night** in Judas' soul. He had no **light** in his soul.

Darkness is scary and is to be avoided. Darkness makes us stumble. Darkness confuses and darkness hides reality. Flee from darkness and run to the light.

Light is where we want to be. Light is God's realm.

A Step into the Light

God - the Light¹

The God who dwells in light (1 Timothy 6)

The Apostle Paul tells us, ***[1 Timothy 6:16] [God] alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen.***

Imagine the most brilliant light show you've ever seen: the best rock show or lightning storm, 4th of July or New Year's Eve fireworks.

They're nothing but votive candles compared to the light in which God dwells.

God dwells in unapproachable light. And He IS Light.

The God who is light (1 John 1)

Toward the end of his life, the Apostle John wrote, ***[1 John 1:5] This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all.***

Light is laughably incomprehensible. It acts like a particle *and* it acts like a wave. We still haven't exactly figured light - or God - out.

Light is energizing and life-giving - like God.

More to the point, though, to say, "**God is light**" is to say that God is holy. Light dispels darkness and God dispels impurity.

As God is Light, He has always called His people to be lights.

God's People - the lights

Israel - a light to the nations (Isaiah 42:6)

The mission of the nation of Israel was to enlighten the nations that surrounded her. She was to model purity, she was to guide the world to God.

As we read in Isaiah, ***[Isaiah 42:6] I am the Lord, I have called You in righteousness, I will also hold You by the hand and watch over You, And I will appoint You as a covenant to the people, As a light to the nations...***

There were times when Israel did better at this than at other times. Sadly, for the most part, she failed.

¹ Besides attributing the characteristics of light to God, the written Word of God is described in the same terms. (See Psalm 19:8; 119:1-5)

The mission God gave to the Jews has now transferred to us who follow Jesus.

Christians - lights in a dark world (Matthew 5:14)

The Lord was speaking to His followers in the Sermon on the Mount when He said about as clearly as it could be said, **[Matthew 5:14a] You are the light of the world.**

That's us. We are to be beacons, directing those we know to Jesus. We are to be lights, pointing the way to purity.

Light is an amazing gift. It dispels darkness, leads and guides, protects and energizes. It's a great metaphor for God and His ways.

BUT - and we can't miss this - you and I are not naturally drawn to the light. We may like to think of ourselves as moths who are attracted to the holiness of God's light, but the Bible says, *"not so fast."*

In fact, this is what Jesus said about light and us.

[John 3:19] "And the judgment is based on this fact: God's light came into the world, but people loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil." (New Living Translation)

The history of humanity shows us to be a race of spiritual ostriches, burying our heads in the sand, refusing to look to the light.

We could go into great detail about the darkness of the world in 2018. That would be easy. And we could go as deep as history books will let us to highlight darkness in the days of Jesus.

But it works just as well to look in the mirror.

Recently, I've been studying the Gospel of John with a good friend. Not long ago, we came to the story of a conversation Jesus had with a woman while He was sitting by a well in Samaria.

My friend saw the love of Jesus toward this woman. He heard the call to love as Jesus loves. I was more drawn to see the similarity between me and the Samaritan woman.

She was a mess.

- She was a despised member of an ethnic group that had been looked down upon for centuries (Samaritans).
- She had been used by men (five failed marriages) and perhaps was not above using men (she was currently living with a man to whom she was not married).
- She avoided the women in her small community (she went to the well at noon, not at the normal morning or evening hours) since she was THAT woman in that village.

Now, I don't see myself in the particulars of that woman's story. But she was a mess, and when I look into a mirror, I see a mess. When you look into a mirror, you will, too.

The Samaritan woman's mess was unique to her. My messiness is unique to me. Your mess is uniquely your mess.

When I'm at my worst, relationally, I tend to withdraw. I don't meaningfully engage. I get morose. When you're at your worst, maybe you lash out.

When life throws you a curve that derails you, maybe you rail at God, get angry at Him, curse Him. I'm more tempted to ignore Him.

I have great friends who have been tripped up by different strains of addictions. I've never been addicted to anything chemical. I have, though, been guilty of lingering in long seasons of spiritual lukewarmth, something Jesus says makes Him sick to His stomach.

We desperately need the light, but we are drawn to the various shades of dark that keep us from the light. As a race and as individuals, we're all in a terrible mess.

That's why, two thousand years ago, God's Light shone, up close and personal", when He sent His only begotten Son, Jesus, to earth.

Jesus is God's Light. And six hundred years before His birth, the prophet Isaiah predicted His arrival. We aren't shocked to find that Isaiah used the vocabulary of light to speak of His arrival.

Light - "Up Close and Personal"!

Jesus - the Light of the World!

His coming was announced in terms of light

**[Isaiah 9:2] The people who walk in darkness
Will see a great light;
Those who live in a dark land,
The light will shine on them.²**

Now that's just what people like us need who are drawn to walk on the dark side. We need a personal light. So, God gave us Jesus.

At the start this morning, we saw that at the start of everything, God spoke a word, created light, and then flung the stars in place.

Around the time of Christ's birth, God performed another creative work in the heavens involving light.

In the East, wise men saw a unique star - a light - in the night sky. They made their way to Jerusalem to find the king whose birth was announced by the star's arrival.³

So, in the Old Testament, God used a pillar of light to lead the Israelites to the **Promised LAND**. When Jesus was born, God used a heavenly light to lead wise men to the **Promised ONE**.⁴

Not surprisingly, light was a frequent theme in Jesus' teachings.

² This was also the verse used to describe the initial impact of Jesus' ministry, **[Matthew 4:16] The people who were sitting in darkness saw a great light, and those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death, upon them a light dawned.**

³ Perhaps the prophecy of Isaiah 9:2 was partially fulfilled with the light dawning on these Gentiles.

⁴ Significantly, Jesus was born at night; He agonized in Gethsemane at night; the crucifixion began at 9 in the morning, but the Bible tells us that toward the end, it got unnaturally dark. darkness covered the face of the land; He was resurrected at night. All of this gives credence to John's comment that **[John 1:5]...the darkness did not comprehend** (better "overpower") **[the light]**.

He self-describes in terms of light

Once, while He spoke to some Jewish rulers who were *at that moment* rejecting Him, He linked Himself to light.

[John 8:12]... "I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life."

And not long after that, when He was with a man who had been born blind and had never seen light, Jesus said, **[John 9:5] While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.**

He proceeded to give that blind man sight, which is what He promises to do, with respect to God, for anyone who comes to Him.

- He opens our eyes to the reality of God.
- He lets us see our need for Him.
- He lights the path to see His ways.
- He protects us from the darkness of sin.

Jesus **shined** while He walked the earth for thirty-three years.⁵ He has continued to **shine** for the last two thousand years in the hearts of those who follow Him.

And the Bible wraps up with the assurance that He will shine throughout eternity.

Jesus - the Light of Heaven! (Revelation 21)

[Revelation. 21:23] And the city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp is the Lamb. [24] The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.

The world of Heaven is the land of light. And Heaven is full of light because it is filled with Jesus, who is the Light.

⁵ Only once, Jesus' deity was revealed to three of His disciples at the Transfiguration. **[Matthew 17:2] And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light.**

Today, Jesus, the Light, offers to enlighten us. He wants to be the Light of our lives.

Conclusion:

Come to the Light for LIFE

***Jesus, God's Light, will lavish His love, grace, and forgiveness on you as you trust Him.

To live without Jesus - the Light - is to live alienated from God. It is to live in spiritual darkness. And it is to face the prospect of a dark eternity after this life is over. Trusting Jesus changes all of that.

On the day that I turned to the Lord Jesus Christ, God transferred me from darkness into light. God said, "***Let there be light in Dave Smith's heart!***" - and He shined Christ's light into my life.

It wasn't because I did some great work. It was because I trusted in the great work that Jesus did.

So, to everyone here today, at the start of this Christmas season, Jesus, the Light, is inviting you to come to Him. Receive the love and grace and forgiveness He longs to lavish on you.

David wrote, ***[Psalm 27:1] The Lord is my light and my salvation!*** - He can be your light and your eternal salvation, too, as you trust Him.

And, then, just like the pillar of fire protected and guided the Israelites in the Old Testament as they walked through the desert, so Jesus' Light will light your path.

Come to the Light, for wisdom

***Jesus, God's Light, will guide you on to the paths of life as you follow Him into "next steps."

It can be a discombobulating experience to walk without a light. I know because I've been there, done that.

My favorite nearby state park is Lost Maples, up in the Texas Hill Country, near Utopia. Kathy and I have been going to Lost Maples for over thirty-five years. (She was pregnant with our son, Ben, on one of our first overnights there.)

I've been hiking there dozens of times and I know the trails pretty well.

Well, back when my sons, Ben and Zach, were in college, we went on an overnighter to Lost Maples during their Christmas break, and found high adventure on those familiar trails.

We drove out, set up camp and cooked dinner. Of course, at that time of year (December/January) it gets dark early. So, just as it got good and dark, we took a hike.

There was a thick cloud cover that night. No starlight and no moonlight. It was very dark. And we agreed to not take flashlights on this hike.

We tried to remember where trail crossings were located and which way to go when we reached them, but were often not sure which way to go.

The darkness made a hike on familiar trails relatively dangerous. It put us off our game. Trails negotiated easily in the daytime pose completely different challenges in the dark.

We tried to be careful, but there were a few near falls because things that you easily see in the light - a tree root across the trail, a low-hanging branch, a rock, a hole - you miss in the dark.

Our imaginations were on high alert in the dark. You would have heard, "*Are you sure there are no bears at Lost Maples?*" and "*What was that noise?*"

Our ears were tuned to every nighttime sound and every rustle in the brush.

I highly recommend flashlight-free night hikes. It's good for the soul.⁶ I don't recommend trying to survive life in 2018 without the Light Jesus provides.

It's dangerous out there. We need the light of the Spirit's guidance through Scripture and the wise counsel of good friends, or we'll trip and fall - hard.

Tree roots and rocks and holes in life's path are everywhere.

We want to navigate 2018 (2019!) with wisdom when it comes to difficult bosses, a challenging marriage, growing kids, stewardship of our finances.

What better way to walk these paths well than to learn to love and to live the timeless wisdom of the Bible? What better help could you find than the perspective of friends who love God and love you when you come to a fork in the road?

Without His Light we are hopelessly lost, like sheep without a shepherd. With Jesus' Light we are equipped to live and honor Him in all we do.

Finally, when we have stumbled and fallen, turning to Jesus' Light brings deliverance.

Come to the Light for deliverance

***Jesus, God's Light, will rescue you from the clutches of sin as you ask Him to search and cleanse you.

I'm now addressing those times when we come to our senses and realize that we've veered off the trail and find ourselves stuck in the dark, deep in briars and poison ivy, or on the edge of a steep cliff.

It is the nature of light to shine in dark places. Jesus will shine His light in the dark places of your life and will direct you back to the path. But it starts with a willingness to recognize that you're in the darkness of a mess of your own making.

King David asked God to shine a flashlight on the dark places of his own life.

***[Psalm 139:23] Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me and know my anxious thoughts;
[24] And see if there be any hurtful way in me,
And lead me in the everlasting way.***

That's a courageous "ask". It can be a frightening experience to turn on a light in the dark. You might not like what you see.

But if you ask Him, will expose the sin and darkness in your life. He'll shine His light so that you see yourself truly. He'll lead you back on to the path of holiness so that your "next steps" are steps into life.

Now, what does all of this discussion about LIGHT have to do with Christmas? Just this:

THE BABY BORN IN BETHLEHEM WAS THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD.

Jesus shines! That's what light does. So, allow His light to shine on you this Christmas season.

[2 Corinthians 4:6] For God, who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness," is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."

⁶ I took another night hike out of necessity that was a little more dicey when health concerns forced a quick exit from the high country of the Wind River Range in Wyoming in 2016. We had to hike out overnight through through a rough section of the northern Rockies. On that hike we had life-saving flashlights, a good picture of the power of LIGHT when navigating dangerous terrain.