

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series:

The Redemptive Disruption of Jesus' Birth

Jesus - Light of the World

(Lots of passages from the Bible. Really.)

Study #3

Introduction: Hikers that go "bump" in the night...

In 2015, my sons Ben and Zach and I went on a backpacking trek through the Wind River Range in Wyoming. It was a great trip, memorable in every way.

We got snowed on (in August), saw epic scenery, hiked over a glacier, and enjoyed great connection. The trip was wonderful, until Day 3...

Having been above 10,000 feet elevation for quite a long time, I began to suffer from altitude sickness, the only cure for which was to walk downhill.

By Day 4, the need to get to lower elevation had become critical. So, the walk out of the mountains proved more epic than anything we had done to that point, because we hiked out at night.

We hiked all night, and it just so happened that it was dark that night.

Imaginations can run wild in the backcountry, and even more so in the dark. That night, every boulder was a grizzly bear. Every rustle of leaves was a mountain lion.

Wilderness hiking is, by definition, exciting. Wilderness hiking in the dark, more so.

Darkness will make any of us uncomfortable and unsure. It puts us off our game. Trails negotiated easily in the daytime will pose more of a challenge in the dark.

Darkness hides danger, but it doesn't eliminate danger. We hiked along in the dark and tripped over tree roots on path, got slapped by branches, and missed a couple of cut-offs we would have seen in daylight hours.

While our nighttime hike worked out well, I prefer the day. I'll choose light over darkness.

Most of us do. And, from the beginning, God has made clear that He prefers light over darkness. I mean from the VERY beginning.

The Dark Side

In the Beginning - Dark (Gen. 1)

[Genesis 1:1] In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. [2] And the earth was a formless and desolate emptiness, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters.

Think back to the point BEFORE "***In the beginning...***" - before "***God created the heavens and the earth.***"

Before that, there was nothing. No people. No animals. No earth. Nothing.

Everything was a formless void. The non-existent universe was empty. And it was dark. Completely dark.

When God moved to bring order to the emptiness, He uttered the first creative words.

[Genesis 1:3]... "Let there be light"

God judged the creation of light to be a good thing. And He next separated the light from the darkness, setting the stage for a daily pitched battle between light and dark that continues to this day.

Late every afternoon and continuing into the evening, dark overpowers the light and rules the night. Every morning, light emerges victorious and rules the day.

Throughout time, God has shown His preference for light over darkness.

For instance, darkness was one of the judgments of God against the Egyptians when Egypt held Israel captive as slaves.

The Curse of Darkness (Exodus 10)

After four hundred years of slavery, God set in motion a plan to set His people free.

He commissioned His servant Moses to go to the Egyptian Pharaoh to tell him, **“Let My people go!”** But Pharaoh’s heart was hard against God, so God sent plagues against Egypt to soften Pharaoh’s will.

- He turned the Nile River to blood.
- Frogs overran the land.
- Gnats spread and insects swarmed throughout Egypt.
- Egyptian cattle died.
- Sore boils broke out all over the Egyptians.
- Hail destroyed the Egyptian crops.
- What the hail didn’t get was devoured by an infestation of locusts.

The plagues came with increasing severity inflicting greater and greater damage on Egypt’s morale, economy, health, and religion.

The first eight plagues were all terrible. The ninth was the worst of them all. It was a plague of darkness so thick it was **“felt.”** (Exodus 10:21)

Get this: God consigned the Egyptians to a few days of pitch-black darkness, but He blessed His people, the Hebrews, with light - **[Exodus 10:23]...all the sons of Israel had light in their dwellings.”**

God continued to bless Israel with light.

Stumbling in the Dark (Exodus 13-14)

Protection (Exodus 13-14)

After the Jews left Egypt, God protected them with a barrier against the Egyptians who pursued them all the way to the Red Sea.

But the Barrier wasn’t a barbed-wire or electrified fence. He protected them with a pillar of light in the form of a fire.

[Exodus 13:21] And 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, so that they might travel by day and by night...

[14:20] So it (the pillar) 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. Therefore the one (Egypt) did not approach the other (Israel) all night.

Guidance (Psalm 78:14)

Light protected God’s people from the enemies who would have destroyed them.

And that pillar remained with Israel even after they crossed the dry Red Sea. It led them and guided them throughout their 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.

Yes, I sure could have used that pillar of light while hiking in the summer of 2015. But God gave His people the light they needed in 1500 BC to protect them and to guide them.

Clearly, in the physical world, light is better than dark.

But “light” and “dark” are sometimes used in the Bible to portray moral good (light) and evil (darkness). And we find this symbolic use of light and darkness in lots of places in the Bible.

Listen as the Apostle John describes Judas Iscariot’s departure from the Passover meal, when he left to betray Jesus.

Dark - Literal AND Symbolic

[John 13:27] After [taking the piece of bread from Jesus], Satan then entered [Judas]. Therefore Jesus said to him, “What you are doing, do it quickly.”...[30] So after receiving the piece of bread he left immediately; AND IT WAS NIGHT.

Sure, it was late and the sun had set. But John’s point is that it was dark in Judas’ soul. He had no light in his soul.

Darkness is something to avoid. Darkness causes us to stumble. Darkness confuses and hides reality. Dark is scary.

Flee darkness. Escape into the light. Light is altogether good. Light is the sphere in which God lives.

A Step into the Light

God - The LIGHT¹

God’s majesty is like light

Paul tells us that God ***[1 Timothy 6:16]...alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one 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 fireworks, the most amazing lightning storm, the best concert ever.

Compared to the LIGHT in which God dwells, those light shows are a single candle at midnight in the woods.

Then, when the Bible stresses God’s leading in our lives or His intervention in our lives, His actions are often expressed in terms of light.

God’s direction is like a lamp

Once, King David sang a song of praise to God for having led him throughout His whole life -
[2 Samuel 22:29] For You are my lamp, Lord; And the Lord illuminates my darkness.

Just as God literally led Israel through the wilderness for forty years with a pillar of fire, so He leads His people into His ways through the light of His Word.

There are even verses that declare that God IS light!

God’s moral nature is laser pure

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.***

Of course, the thought here is that God is holy. He is morally pure. Darkness would implicate God in sin. There is none of that in Him. He is light, all light, nothing but light.

And as God is Light, His people are called to be lights. In both the Old and New Testaments God identifies His people as lights and calls us to shine in a dark world.

God’s People - The “lights”

Israel - a light to the nations

The nation of Israel was to be light to the nations that surrounded her.

The thought was that she was to model purity of life and that she was to be an evangelistic force.

¹ Besides attributing the characteristics of light to God, the written Word of God is described in the same terms. See Psalm 19:8 and 119:105.

As Isaiah says,
***[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***

And, of course, you and I, as Christ-followers, are called to be lights today.

Christians - lights in a dark world

When Jesus wanted to describe the effects of His own followers in the world, He said in the Sermon on the Mount, ***[Matthew 5:14a] You are the light of the world.***

Our mission is to be beacons for God. We direct our friends and family to Jesus. We are to lead pure lives - no sinful darkness allowed.

Summary: Light is a wonderful gift. It leads us and protects us. And, throughout the Bible, light and darkness are portrayed as moral opposites.

- God is light, while Satan and his works are continually referred to in terms of darkness.
- The Bible provides the light that keeps us from stumbling in the darkness of sin.
- Those who believe in Jesus are lights, sent to shine in the world.

Light is one of the most frequently used biblical metaphors for God's way, for God's truth, and for the life that God gives.

BUT - and this is huge - while we may be uncomfortable with darkness, we are not naturally drawn to the light.

We might like to think of ourselves as moths who are attracted to God's holy light, but the Bible says, *"No. Not exactly..."*

Listen to the words of John 3:19, ***"And this is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil."***

The story of humanity reveals that we are a race of spiritual ostriches. We bury our heads in the sand. We refuse to look to the light.

So, we who avoid light find ourselves in a quandary.

We have abandoned the well-lit highway of God's truth and have struck out on unlit paths of our own making through the dark where dangers of every kind await.

If we continue living in the darkness of God's absence, we will inevitably stumble and fall.

If we are to NOT fall, we must be "enlightened." A light must be put in our path, or we are doomed. Light must intercept us.

Well, two thousand years ago, in the most compelling way we could imagine, God's Light shined, *"up close and personal."*

Light - "Up Close and Personal"!

Jesus - The Light of the World!

His coming announced in terms of light

The prophet Isaiah had a lot to say about a coming Jewish King who would also be a Suffering Servant. He is referred to as the Messiah. Isaiah described the Messiah's arrival with these words:

***[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***

Jesus' arrival was foretold in terms of a breakthrough of light.

Part of what Isaiah means refers to the spiritually illuminating ministry of Jesus. But we can't miss that hundreds of years after that prophecy a light actually appeared in the sky.

² This was also the verse used to describe the initial impact of Jesus' ministry. See Matthew 4:16.

In the East, wise men saw a LIGHT appear. And these Magi made their way to Jerusalem to find the King whose birth was announced by the star's arrival.

So, in the Old Testament, God used a pillar of firelight to lead the Israelites to the **Promised Land**. At the time of Jesus' arrival, wise men were led by the light to the **Promised One**.

Jesus' birth was announced by light. And light played a prominent role in His life and teachings, like that one time when Jesus really shined. Literally.

His majesty unveiled in terms of light

Jesus had gone up to a high mountain with three of His disciples (Peter, James, and John). There, the disciples saw Jesus as the central figure in a dazzling light show.

[Matthew 17:2] And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light.

We usually refer to this event as "The Transfiguration" - as if at this event Jesus became something other than what He was. Actually, there on top of that mountain is the only time in the Gospels when we get to see Jesus for who He TRULY is, clothed in unapproachable light.

Just as importantly, when the Lord spoke about Himself, He often couched His self-descriptions in terms of light.

He self-described in terms of light

Once, He was speaking to Jewish rulers who were rejecting Him. He inextricably linked Himself to light.

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

That is Jesus' claim that He is the Lighthouse that will reliably direct every wayward soul out of the darkness of this world, safely home to God.

Jesus says, *"Look to the light that I provide. Follow my searchlight beam, and I will bring you home. I am the light you have needed and longed for all your life."*

Later in His ministry, He was with a man who had been born blind.

As Jesus prepared to give the man sight, He said, ***[John 9:5] While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.***

In other words, *"Light is what I am. Shine is what I do."*

What He did there in giving a man who had never seen the gift of sight is what He came to do for you and me and everyone we know.

- Open our eyes to the reality of God.
- Let us see our need for Him.
- Let us see the beauty of Jesus and the wonder of the cross.

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

The book of Revelation says that He will continue to shine throughout eternity.

Jesus - The Light of Heaven!

[Rev. 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 illuminated 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 - the Light

Today, He offers enlightenment. He offers to be the Light of our lives.

Conclusion:

Notice how God repeatedly mocked darkness at critical moments in the life and times of Jesus.

He was resurrected at night, before dawn. He broke the bonds of death during dark hours so that by the time Mary Magdalene got to the tomb, He was long gone.

The crucifixion began at 9:00am. Daylight was already in place. But, as that day wore on, from noon forward, the sky darkened.

While Jesus died at 3:00pm, Mark records that, **[Mark 15:33] darkness covered the face of the whole land.** Jesus defeated the darkness of sin in the dark.

And this holy mockery of darkness all started when God saw to it that Jesus, the Light of the World, would be born at night.

I believe that God was sending a message through the timing of these redemptive events.

He was announcing His authority over the darkness. By mocking the night, He foreshadowed the doom of the prince of darkness.

So, since the Baby born at Bethlehem two thousand years ago was - and is - the Light of the world, invite Him to shine on you.

Trust Him and He will transfer you from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light.

On the day (actually, it was at night...) that I turned by faith to Jesus, I moved from darkness into light. God said, **"Let there be light in Dave Smith's heart!"** - and He shined Christ's light into my life.

I was saved from the darkness of life without God solely because I turned to Jesus. I believed that He would keep His promise to give me eternal life if I would believe in Him to give it.

The same will be true for you when you trust Him for eternal life.

Invite Him to be your guide through life.

It was an exciting thing for me to walk through wilderness at night, in the dark. I won't do it again unless I have to, but (especially in retrospect), it was quite the experience.

I can't, though, imagine the terror of walking through life in the dark, without light to guide me.

And it may be that you have believed in the Lord Jesus Christ for eternal life. You are saved, justified before God. But, you have never yet reckoned with your need for Jesus' guiding light.

We see His light in the pages of Scripture, in the quiet nudges of the Spirit, and in the Jesus-centered counsel of friends.

Today would be a great day to abandon your own "take" on how the world works. It's time to learn to rely on what God considers "getting ahead", submit to His direction, walk in His light.

And one last thought about light.

It can be frightening to turn on a light in a dark room. You might not like what you see.

Turn on the light in a kitchen where food has not been properly stored and you might hear the sound of scurrying little feet on the counter tops!

But, it is the nature of light to shine in dark places. Absent light, we don't know what needs to be cleaned up.

So, why don't you and I agree today, that we will invite Jesus, the Light, to shine His searching flashlight into our lives, to explore dark places in our souls, to expose areas that we have allowed to remain hidden?

When Jesus' light shines on us, we see what He sees. We see what needs to change.

He has been gracious to do that for me recently.

In the past several days, His light has exposed my insensitivity to the need of a good friend, my neglect of a friend who has recently suffered a great loss, my impatience with another friend, and my failure to take initiative to serve another friend.

Jesus has been so gracious to shine His light so that I can see some of what needs to be addressed.

He will do the same for you if you ask Him. And He will guide you in growth from enlightenment to repentance to rebuilding to restoration.

The Jesus who was born a Baby in Bethlehem, whom we worship, came to be the Light of the world. Let His light shine on you today.

[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."