

SERMON TITLE: "I Am the Light of the World"  
SERMON TEXT: John 8:12-20  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: February 18, 2024, at First United Methodist Church

### **INTRODUCTION**

All the recent talk about Utah hosting the 2034 Winter Olympics has caused me to remember the now-retired, former Olympian Usain Bolt. Bolt wasn't a winter sports guy. He was a Jamaican sprinter who won championships in 2008, 2012, and 2016. I especially remember watching him in 2012. First, Usain Bolt won gold medals in both the 100 and 200-meter dashes. Then, with his Jamaican team, he also won the 4x100 race, earning him the world speed records in all three of those contests. Bolt wasn't known only for his speed, however. Bolt was quite the showman. After winning his races, he drew extra attention to himself as he held up his number one finger, ran an extra lap, kissed the ground, and did a set of pushups. Adding his 2012 victories to his previous Olympic and world record championships, the Jamaican then declared, "I am legend," and few could disagree. Well-named, Usain Bolt ran like a bolt of lightning that flashed throughout the world.

Today's sermon topic isn't about speed. But it is about the light of the world. Throughout this season of Lent and Easter, I'm going to preach a series of sermons on the seven "I Am" sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of John. Today we begin with Jesus' declaration, "I am the light of the world."

### **1—THE CREATOR OF LIGHT**

When we hear, "I am the light of the world," possibly the first thought that flashes through our minds is the truth that God is the creator of light. Genesis 1 tells us that, in the beginning, "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light . . . God separated the light from the darkness" and that was "the first day." Genesis 1 also tells us that, on the fourth day, God created the "two great lights"—the sun and the moon—plus the expanse of the stars.

God wasn't alone in this light-creating process, however. According to John's gospel, Jesus was connected to and involved in that divine act. Among the four gospels, John is the one which has the highest Christology, or, to say that another way, John is the gospel with the most-divine Jesus. In comparison, the Gospel of Mark conveys the idea that the divinity of God's Spirit came upon the man Jesus when he was an adult, at the time of his baptism by John in the Jordan River. Matthew and Luke both portray God's Spirit coming upon the young Mary, so that Jesus would be conceived and born as the Son of God. But, in John's gospel, Jesus is referred to as the Word who "was God" and who "was with God in the beginning." John chapter one says that "through him all things were made." In the Gospel according to John, we hear Jesus declaring his oneness with God, the *Creator* of light.

## **2—GOD/JESUS=THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD**

When Jesus said, "I am the light of the world," however, he wasn't only talking about creating light the way that Thomas Edison invented, or created, the light bulb. Jesus also wanted to convey the idea that God and Jesus themselves are so closely associated with the creation and existence of light that one could use the metaphor that they are the light. We read this same metaphor in First John 1:15—"God is light; in God there is no darkness at all."

You may recall that, in Exodus chapter 3, when God spoke to Moses from the burning bush, God identified himself by saying only "I am," or "I am who I am." God was being vague on purpose, so that Moses and the Hebrew people wouldn't be able to pin God down and trap God in a little box. The God who was calling Moses to rescue the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt didn't want to be stereotyped or idolized in stone. God was amazingly complex and wonderful and wanted to be free to move and reveal different divine characteristics at different times. God will always be more than any single name or metaphor can convey. That meant Moses and the Hebrews would have to get to know God through their relationship, over time and in changing circumstances. But, even so, God did give Moses a little clue right away in the fact that God's voice was accompanied by the light of the fire in that burning bush.

Hundreds of years later, in Isaiah 60, we hear another description of God as light. Giving hope to a nation that had suffered horribly from war, destruction, and exile, the Prophet Isaiah told his people that the day was coming when their grief would be over. “The sun will no longer be your light by day,” he said, “nor will the moon shine for illumination by night.” Instead, “the Lord will be your everlasting light.”

When everything we know to be true and good and consistent is shaken—when even the sun doesn’t seem to shine anymore—we can get pretty upset, angry, and depressed. But God assures us that, eventually, things will be alright. Ultimately, it isn’t even the divinely-created sun, moon, or stars—or any other created things—that give us light. It is God, God’s very own self, that shines in the darkness, showing us a path, and providing us a way to move forward.

Five hundred years or so after Isaiah wrote his words of comfort to the Babylonian exiles, this same divine characteristic of light was seen in Jesus. Speaking of the Word which was with God from the beginning, the Word which became flesh and dwelt among us, the first chapter of John’s Gospel tells us that “what came into being through the Word was . . . light for all people.”

The same God who enlightened Moses and gave hopeful words to Isaiah was present in Jesus, enlightening the people of the first century, showing them how to survive the harshness of Roman occupation, the rigidity of their own religious laws, and the destruction of their Jewish temple. The light of the world showed them (and us) that, no matter how bad it might seem, no matter what oppression, prejudice, misunderstanding, sickness, loss, or disaster is causing distress, the darkness will not prevail. When Jesus said, “I am the light of the world,” he meant that the light is not distant in time or place or weak in power. The light of the world lives among us and shines powerfully in every generation because the light of the world comes from and is God’s very self.

### **3—WE ARE LIGHT OF THE WORLD**

When Jesus said, “I am the light of the world,” he had a third meaning in mind, as well: God created all of us to be the light of the world too. Jesus spoke like this in the Gospel according to Matthew.

There, in chapter five, in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “You are the light of the world . . . No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

God and Jesus are bright lights indeed. But we also are called to this role and function. Because of the high Christology of John’s Gospel, where Jesus is aligning himself with God, we tend to think of Jesus’ light as being so much superior to our own. But in John 14:12, Jesus said, “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do.” “In fact,” said Jesus, they “will do greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.”

When Jesus spoke his “I am” statements that sounded so blasphemous to his detractors, he was claiming for himself what he really wanted all his followers to claim. We are the children of God. We are united with God. If God is the light of the whole world for all time, then we should at least be the light of the world in this time and place in which we live.

How do we do that? Obviously, we follow the example of Jesus in caring for the oppressed, the poor, the sick, and the victimized. We offer spiritual care, as well as physical. We challenge the powers of greed and injustice in our society, and we live and communicate with each other in a way that shines the light of God here in our own church and at home in our families.

As I was thinking about the light we Christians are called to be, I remembered a book I’ve had on my shelf for a number of years. The title is *More Light, Less Heat*. The subtitle is *How Dialogue Can Transform Christian Conflicts into Growth*. The author suggests that—rather than fighting, fleeing, or denying—the best way to manage Christian conflict might be, instead, to engage in some dialogue. Dialogue doesn’t reduce tension right away, the author warns. But dialogue does “allow the tension to be transformed into the work of God.”<sup>1</sup>

The work of God. The light of God. The light of God and Jesus in us. We too are called to be the light of the world.

### **CONCLUSION**

The mass shooting in Kansas City on Wednesday reminded us of the many previous gun violence tragedies that have occurred in our country. Years ago, after a gunman shot people at a Batman *The Dark Knight Rises* movie showing in Colorado, a United Methodist minister wrote an article about it. He related that, as a child, he had been at the scene of gun violence at his own elementary school, when a woman entered his classroom, opened fire, killed one child, and wounded four more.

Rev. Anderson wrote that that horrific experience of his childhood caused him to become a fan of the superhero Batman, who had come into existence because of a similar tragedy. As the origin story goes in the movie *Batman Begins*, as a child, Bruce Wayne witnessed his parents shot down in a dark alley outside a theater. Growing up with that trauma, Bruce Wayne “decided that he would become a symbol for a city that needed a hero.” As the character states, “‘I’m going to show the people of Gotham that the city doesn’t belong to the criminals and the corrupt . . . I can’t do this as Bruce Wayne. A man is just flesh and blood and can be ignored or destroyed. But as a symbol . . . as a symbol, I can be incorruptible [and] everlasting.’”<sup>2</sup>

Rev. Anderson, who wrote the article, understood well the difference between the fictional Batman and the true and living God. But, as he wrote, our human need is the same. We need to know that there is hope in our darkest hours. We need to know that there is not only a Dark Knight but also a Divine Light who will fight the darkness when it engulfs us. And we need to know that that same Divine Light has created us to join forces with the one who said, “I am the Light of the World.”

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<sup>1</sup>Joseph Phelps (Josey-Bass Inc., Publishers: San Francisco, 1999), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup>Kevin Anderson, “A ‘dark night’ revives memories,” *United Methodist Reporter*, Aug. 10, 2012.