

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

3rd Sunday of Lent

Duane M. Harris

March 8, 2015

Text: John 8:12-20

Title: "The God We Can Know: Knowing God's Guidance"

Maybe you remember a few weeks ago when the service focused on Moses' experience with God at the burning bush which is why we have the symbol of that bush here with sandals to remind us of that encounter with God. Last week, we enjoyed the smell and the taste freshly baked bread as we pondered Jesus as the bread of life which is why a shellacked loaf is on the altar from one of the bread machines located around the church last week.

This morning we consider Jesus as the light of the world and the symbols you see express the theme for this morning's worship experience.

When Lynn turned the clocks ahead yesterday, I stood at the kitchen sink as we were getting dinner together. I looked at one of the newly changed clocks. It was 7:45 p.m. Looking out the window over the sink I said to her, "Isn't it nice to see light and it's nearing 8 p.m.?"

We love light, especially after another long Michigan winter. For many reasons, I suppose, we so appreciate the coming of spring: the relief from handling the snow, the freedom of leaving home without a coat, the renewed beauty of colors spewing from the ground when the flowers bloom, the smell of fresh cut grass. It's a ritual of renewal every year and something we celebrate. And it all happens as a result of more light.

We know, of course, that there are periods in our lives in which it feels more like winter than spring, more like darkness than light. Maybe it's momentary. Maybe longer, but in the words of the hymn we will sing at the close of the service this morning "...though the darkness hide thee, though the eye of sinful man thy glory may not see", sometimes it's hard to see the light of God.

And yet, we have this Word from the Gospel According to John in which Jesus proclaims "I am the light of the world." But what does it mean exactly? If Jesus is the light, what is light anyway? Ever try to define it?

I checked the dictionary. Here's what Webster says about light: "electromagnetic radiation to which the organs of sight react, ranging in wavelength from about 4000 to 7700 angstrom units propagated at a speed of about 186,300 miles per second." Well, that answers the question, right?

If you're like me you need a better explanation than that, so I checked some internet resources. Here's what Einstein said about light in the development of his quantum theory of Light. He said it was "electromagnetic radiation [that] traveled as tiny packets of energy called quanta, or photons, that behaved like particles." Huh?

Ok, Webster's not much help, nor Einstein. How about Isaac Newton: "... tiny particles,

or corpuscles, emitted by luminous bodies."

Isn't it true that there are some things in life that are more easily described than defined? The physicists whose lives have been dedicated to a search for defining and understanding common elements of the universe are not very helpful to those of us who simply experience those elements. Every living creature experiences light, but don't ask us to define it. Ask us to talk about what light does and we have little difficulty.

For example, we all know that light reveals. Walk into an unfamiliar dark room in the middle of the night and you'll likely run into something. Turn on a light and everything becomes visible: furniture layout, doors, painted walls, cracks in the plaster, worn spots on the carpets. Light allows us to see. It reveals that which is exposed to it. We don't much care if it's a particle or a wave. But we do care that it keeps us from stubbing our toe in the middle of the night.

Light can also guide. When I was about 19 or 20, a friend of mine and I were out deer hunting. On the plat map I'd found this section of land near my grandmother's home on Sand Lake. It was one of the largest sections of land in Iosco County that didn't have many roads or trails. The road that did lead into the property ran through a creek that was fairly wide with an unstable bottom. A few four wheeling enthusiasts tried running it, but the deep ruts indicated many of them didn't make it. So the property was fairly inaccessible. We had to walk what seemed like a mile before we came to mature woods.

It was early afternoon when we arrived. Fred and I agreed to hunt using a method we'd read about somewhere: walk 10 minutes wait 20, walk 10 minutes wait 20. We split up, having set a meeting time and place for later in the day. We hunted all afternoon, saw a few deer. No bucks. Met at the agreed upon place. It was past dusk, you know, that period when the sun is well below the horizon but the sky is still dim with light? And we had a long walk back to the car. So we started off in the direction we both agreed was how we'd entered the woods. Twenty minutes later we still hadn't come to the edge of the woods. Now, we could see the stars and our breath in the cold night air. Nothing looked recognizable. We tried revising our route. Kept walking but still no edge of the woods.

Now it was dark. We both had flashlights but chose to leave them off because we thought we might see a light more easily. We were getting worried and began to talk about just spending the night in the woods. Boy Scout training kept flooding my thoughts. Always, I remember multiple leaders drilling us, always when lost in the woods, find a place of shelter and stay put. Someone will eventually find you.

We began talking about doing just that. I had matches—again thanks to Scout training—and even a flint and steel kit in my pack. But neither of us had saved any food. So we decided to keep walking a little longer and if nothing came of it, we'd start a fire and stay in the woods.

As we continued to crunch through the snow, one of us saw it: a light. Just a small glimmer through the trees. Didn't know if it was a flashlight or headlight or what, but it clearly was not a star, nor any kind of natural light. Our hearts lightened as we picked our way through the trees, ignoring the path we'd been following. All we cared about was getting to that small glimmer of light because it meant we'd probably find someone nearby who could point us in the right direction. Our boots sinking into the cold snow with each step, we wove around trees keeping our eyes on that light. Finally we came to a clearing. A yard. Somebody's house. Somebody's porch light. Stepping out of the woods, we walked up to the door, hoping someone would be home. Knocked on the door. A man answered. Smile on his face. At the time we didn't think it was all that funny, but he'd been through this before. We shared our dilemma,

told him where our car was.

He said he knew the place. About a mile and a half away. And this kind gentleman grabbed his coat, his keys, and took these two young, tired, hungry, lost hunters back to the comfort of our car so we could make our way home.

Just a little light: that's all we needed. It wasn't much but without it we would not have found our way home.

In John's Gospel Jesus said "I am the light of the world". In the book of Genesis the very first chapter of the first book of the Bible, what was the first thing that God created?

³ Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good; (Genesis 1:3).

Like the very first book of the Bible, the Gospel According to John starts out with light:

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. 4 In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Sometimes all we need is just a little of that light of Jesus to lead us through the darkness. It doesn't take much really, just a small spot in the dark to lead us home. It's like the mustard seed: such a small seed that grows into a great tree in which all the birds of the air make their nests or maybe like leaven in the bread, a small amount hidden within causes the dough to rise. Just a little bit of Jesus is sometimes all it takes to lead us home, just a word of affirmation when we're questioning our worth, an unexpected visit from someone who likes you, a sentence in a card from someone you're missing, God's still, small voice reminding you that you are not alone, a little hope that life—that you—are still in the hands of a caring God.

If you are in one of the small group studies, you know—if you've read the chapter on Jesus as the light of the world—that Jesus may have offered this metaphor during the festival of the Tabernacles. This was a festival established to remind the freed slaves that they still needed God after they arrived in the Promised Land. The festival was a reminder that when they were freed from slavery in Egypt to the wilderness wanderings, God guided them according to Exodus 13 as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night "to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people" (vv. 21-22).

When the Hebrew people arrived in the Promised Land, the presence of God as pillar of cloud and fire disappeared, but the people still needed God and so the festival was established to remember God's faithfulness and their continued need for God. One of the key practices in the festival was the night of the Grand Illumination. According to other sources, there were four candlesticks in the Courtyard of the Women on top of which were four golden bowls, presumably filled with oil. The wicks consisted of the used undergarments of the priests. These wicks were lit so that it was said that all of Jerusalem reflected the light. (p. 344, *The Gospel According to John*, V. 1, Brown). It was in the context of this festival so focused on the light of God's guidance that Jesus may have proclaimed "I am the light of the world."

It is a metaphor of hope in God's power and presence through Christ. It's especially

powerful when taken in the context of Jesus being sought out to be arrested by the Temple police. His life is at stake here, and still he proclaims “I am the light of the world” remembering perhaps the image of God as the pillar of fire guiding the people from slavery to freedom.

It’s as if Jesus is saying “I am your pillar of fire guiding you one leg of the journey at a time from slavery to freedom. Follow me.” Jesus is a sign of hope in their present darkness. There is more to come, something better, than presently known and understood.

There are always periods when we, too, wait for something better. We wait for the healing of an illness, for someone with whom to be in a significant relationship, for more satisfying work, for an easing of tension between nations, a greener earth, a child to be born or adopted, a life to peacefully end after long-suffering, for depression to melt away and allow joy again. We hope for a better day, looking through the darkness for the sign that there’s hope for more meaningful living than we may be experiencing in the present. Looking to Christ for promised hope is what gets us through the tough times.

Victor Frankl had been a successful therapist before he was taken to a Nazi death camp. He wrote about his experience in the camp in his book Man’s Search for Meaning. Bishop Will Willimon described Frankl’s experience in a sermon:

While in the camp, [Frankl] ...spent his time observing himself and his fellow inmates. In fact, his curiosity, his inner determination to learn and to grow even in this horrible setting were major factors in his survival. He noted that some of the prisoners just wasted away and died rather quickly, even though they had no discernible physical ailments. He recalls a man who one day was doing reasonably well, considering the deplorable conditions of the camp. The man often talked of his dream to get out of the camp and to be united with his dear wife.

Then the man received word that his wife had died in another prison camp. And in just a couple of days, the man died. Frankl concluded that the man died, not because of some bodily ailment, not because he lacked food or water, but because he lacked hope. He lacked hope that there was anything to be had beyond the darkness of the bleak prison camp, that there was anything beyond the present anguish of the Nazis and their brutality. We can live, said Frankl, longer without bread than we can live without hope.

(Pulpit Resource, Nov-Dec 2002, pp.49-50)

Do you have that kind of hope in the Light of the World? Are you guided by more than the need to survive and acquire but rather by the One who came according to John 3:17 “not to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him?” In this Lenten season, I invite you to consider practices that deepen hope in Christ. Pick up a devotional like the UPPER ROOM at the Welcome Center and begin spending intentional time with God every

day, listening for God's still, small voice in the quiet. Join one of the small groups considering these I am sayings of Jesus in more detail. It's not too late to join. You will be fed by the conversations in those relationships, I promise you. Keep a journal throughout the rest of Lent, offering your needs to God and see what the Light of the World will do with those needs. Find someone you trust and have spiritual conversation about whatever questions or convictions you have about Christ and what it means to follow him.

In John's Gospel, Jesus proclaims "I am the Light of the World." There's nothing here about waves or particles or quantum theory. But there is everything here about hope. We need hope. We need light, the light of God in Christ to bring us home again. And so we watch. And so we hope...all because we need more light.