

Jesus Our Light

DAVE BAST

Somebody once said that the one thing all religions have in common is they all use candles. Well, I do not know if that is true or not, but the idea it suggests to me is how important light is as a symbol. John's Gospel begins with a profound theological statement about the nature and incarnation of the divine word; a statement which can help us understand just who Jesus is and why he came to be one of us. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and today we are going to dig into one of the great passages of scripture, the familiar prologue to the Gospel of John, John 1:1-18. We will just look at the first dozen or so verses of that; but it is the story, really, of what is called sometimes the Great Mystery of the Incarnation, and it is unique among the four Gospels, really.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is. Often read at Christmas, although of course, John 1 is so rich it has resonance all through the year, but certainly at Christmas. The four Gospels – if you think of Matthew, Mark, and Luke – Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus and then there is a very brief birth narrative before telling the magi story.

DAVE BAST

He is a very Jewish writer; writing for a Jewish audience, and so...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Trying to prove that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. Mark dives right in. We do not get any early stories. We go straight to John the Baptist and Jesus' baptism, and then of course, Luke. Luke gives us all of the Christmas story that we know, practically, in his first two chapters; but John begins with a very, very big frame of reference: John begins cosmically.

DAVE BAST

And let's listen to that beginning; these wonderful opening words from John 1: ¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. ²He was with God in the beginning. ³Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. 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.

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁹The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and although the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹²Yet, to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God; ¹³children born not of natural descent nor of human decision nor a

husband's will, but born of God.

DAVE BAST

Born of God. So, usually, Scott, when we look at that, we start with verse 1 and then jump to verse 14; at least, it seems like that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, we skip those...

DAVE BAST

Those are the high points. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us," and certainly, John I:14 is a profound and important verse, but let's take a look instead at what comes in between those, in the other 12 or 13 verses, where John makes the point that in coming into the world, Jesus really brought two things: he brought life and he brought light; so John says that he was the creator: Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made; and then this verse, verse 4: In him – in Christ – was life and that life was the light of all people. And the light shines in darkness, he says, and the darkness has not overcome it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Which, as my friend, Dale Bruner, the Bible commentator, points out, in John 1 you have all past tenses in those first verses: *Was* the Word; *was* with God; all things *were* made; but then you get that first present tense, and when Dale Bruner reads this publicly, he always emphasizes it; He says, "The light *shinesss* in the darkness; he emphasizes that *s* because it is still shining. It has never gone out since it began shining, and for John that is very, very important. That light is our life and our life is that light – it goes back and forth both ways, and it is still shining in this world, and apparently, John believes – and I think most of us intuitively know – the reason that is important is, this world is otherwise very, very dark with sin and evil.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely, but Jesus coming into the world came like this great sunburst; this great explosion of light in the darkness; and as he says in verse 5, that is actually translated differently. The word is a little bit difficult. It could mean the darkness has not understood it – understood the light – or it could be the darkness has not overcome it; so, often there will be a footnote saying it could be one or the other; but again, you think of Jesus and his reaction; so many people did not understand him. Paul says if they had understood, they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory; but also, it seems like the world did its best to extinguish the light that came with Jesus, and that finally Satan snuffed it out on Good Friday when the darkness fell at noon; but no, the darkness has not overcome it because the light is still shining – the power of Jesus' life is still shining for good in the world.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is an amazing thing insofar as what you said, Dave, is exactly true. The world tried to extinguish his light. Well, why would you do that? The world needs light; it is so dark. If we think just for a moment – and sometimes at Christmas, for some people, at least, the truth of what I am about to say deepens for them for various reasons. We use darkness and the lack of light to describe things that are generally sad. The great author, William Styron, who wrote the great novel, *Sophie's Choice*, struggled with depression his whole life, and he had a memoir on that once, which was titled: *Darkness Visible*.

DAVE BAST

Churchill, who also struggled, surprisingly, with depression called it the black dog; so think of what darkness suggests: Feeling very low; feeling blue, we say; or the darkness of sin or evil that oppresses us; that seems to be crowding out the light; or even the darkness of ignorance. In a cartoon, when somebody has an idea a light bulb goes off over their head; light stands for knowledge, for wisdom, for truth, for joy, for happiness; all that is good.

SCOTT HOEZEE

All that we want, and the absence of light – so often at Christmas in some parts of the world – not every part, but the part of the world that I have mostly lived in in the United States have very short days in the winter and we actually have this thing called seasonal affective disorder – it is called SAD, and it is because people do not get enough light, and the therapy for these people is to give them light. They have bright lights shining at their desks during the day to make up for the absence of light coming into their eyes and into their bodies. So, all over the place we see “the dark side of the Force,” even in the Stars Wars stories, or the old line: Nothing good happens after midnight – in the dark. We need light!

DAVE BAST

Actually – and I think that goes back to the introduction to this program – talking about the power of light, of candles, even. Think of the Advent wreathes that so many of our churches, and many families, too, will have them at home as each week we light another candle as we anticipate the coming of the holy child and the wonderful joy of Christmas, or a Christmas Eve service with candlelight and the light flickering in the darkness. It is all suggesting to us on a deep, symbolic level – kind of on a physical level – what we know to be true spiritually; that when Jesus came into the world, there was life, and that life is expressed in terms of light, because you cannot have life without light. If there is no light, there is no life. Nothing grows in the dark; at least, nothing you can eat, as I once heard a master gardener explain. The only thing that is edible is going to be grown in the light; it is going to require light; and that is what Jesus comes – and in fact, so many of our carols make that same point: *O, Little Town of Bethlehem: Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by; yet in the dark streets shineth the everlasting light...* says the carol.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and John says this light we are talking about – it is not any old light, John says – he is the true light, enlightens everybody, that light was coming into the world, and of course, Jesus will directly make that claim about himself eventually in John’s Gospel, continuing that theme, and we will look at that next.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, in this program of *Groundwork*, thinking a little bit along the season of Christmas, we are looking at John Chapter 1, and we have been thinking about particularly John’s revelation that what Jesus – the word of God made flesh – what he brought to the world was light; and that light was also the essence of the life that Jesus brings to us, because it is a dark world and we need light; we need light in our souls, we say; we need light in our minds, illumination; we need light in oh so many ways; and that, John said, he was the true light and that is what he brings us even today.

DAVE BAST

Exactly; and there is also another great festival that is celebrated in December, a little bit earlier than Christmas, and that is the festival of Chanukah, which commemorates a great victory of the Jewish people during the time between the Old Testament and the New Testament when the Temple had been captured by the forces of a Greek king, Antiochus Epiphanes, and under the Maccabees, the two brothers who led a successful revolt. Jerusalem was retaken and the Temple was recovered, and it was cleansed again after its defilement, and they wanted to light the great menorah in the Temple – the great lampstand with its seven lamps (or eight lamps), but they only had enough oil for one day; and miraculously, the story says, the lamps burned for eight days until more oil could be prepared. So that is the miracle of Chanukah, or the Festival of Lights, and it was also called the Festival of Dedication because the Temple then was rededicated; and John interestingly says that Jesus appeared once at the Festival of Dedication. He mentions it in John Chapter 10 when he was in the Temple teaching and in that same context comes this great statement in John 8:12, Jesus

stands up – and again, think of the background – all lights and lights being lit and there was a great blazing menorah in the courtyard of the Temple, we are told, during this ceremony, in the dark days of winter; and Jesus took that occasion to stand and say, “I am the light of the world, whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but have the light of life.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is as though he saw those lights and those candles and said: That is great, but I have something better; I am the light. But, Jesus always made clear – and we saw this even in John 1 and in what we read in the first segment of this program, Dave, that it is fully possible to have the light of the world burning in front of you and not see it. It is fully possible to not receive it; and in fact, in and around that part of John, John 8, 9, and 10, which we were just talking about, the Feast of Dedication and Jesus saying, “I am the light.” There is also the healing of the man born blind in there, and Jesus is clearly the light of the world. He restores this man’s sight, and yet, the Pharisees do not see him; and they end up saying, “What, are we blind?” at the end of that story, and Jesus said: Well, pretty much. The light of the world is standing right in front of you and...

DAVE BAST

And you are missing him, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It reminds me – I think we have mentioned this before – we mention C. S. Lewis every chance we get. At the very end of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the stories about the children – the children are brought to heaven – what we would call the new creation, the new Narnia; it is beautiful, it is bright, and it is light, and it is just awash with color; and yet, the children in the middle of it all see this group of dwarves who are insisting they are sitting in a dark, dank, stinky barn, and Lucy or one of the children says to Aslan, you know, the Christ figure, “What is with the dwarves? Why cannot they see how beautiful this place is?” And Aslan basically says, “There are some things I just cannot do. If they will not see it, they will not see it. They are convinced they are in a dark barn; they cannot see the light all around them, and that is true throughout the Bible. If we accept Jesus, the light floods our souls, but it is possible, unfortunately, to miss it – to shut your eyes.

DAVE BAST

This is a theme that runs through the Gospels, and it is also stated here in the prologue, going back to John 1; listen again to this section:

¹⁰He was in the world and although the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹He came to his own – his own people – but his own did not receive him. ¹²Yet, to all who did receive him – to those who believed in his name – he gave the right to become children of God, children born not of natural descent nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.

So, there is the great theme, the great contrast; Jesus is the light, but do you see him? Do you receive him? Do you believe in him, as he says in Chapter 8:12: Whoever believes in me will never walk in darkness.

There is a qualification to the promise, and it is dependant upon faith.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Faith is the first gift that God gives us in salvation; and in this case, and there are a lot of different metaphors and models for faith, but in this particular context, of course, we would want to say that when God gives you the gift of faith, the first thing it does is it opens your eyes; it lets you see that, indeed, the light of the world is standing right in front of you and it is shining right in front of you; and John’s whole purpose in writing this opening chapter – and of the whole Gospel – is to help us recognize that, yes, Jesus is the one. Jesus is the true light.

And by the way, just quickly here, that is also why in that opening prologue – some people have compared the opening prologue to a poem or a song, but John calls a timeout early on to say, “Oh, by the way, John the Baptist? No, he is not the light. He only came – because there were some people who thought – well into after Jesus’ resurrection, the Apostles were still running into John the Baptist churches, and so John wants to make clear: No, he came to point to the light, and that is what I am doing. In fact, John says something like that near the end of his Gospel, right?

DAVE BAST

Right, exactly; famous conclusion in John 20:31, where John says that this is written so you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. John is the great Gospel of faith. He is calling each of us. So much of our faith as Christians is corporate, and we want to emphasize that; it is not just an individualistic thing; but you cannot escape the note of individual responsibility. We are, each of us, confronted with Jesus, and the question is: What do we make of him? Are we blind to his significance? Do we sniff at him and dismiss him? Do we say, “Oh my, yeah; he was an interesting religious teacher who lived long ago...”

SCOTT HOEZEE

Great teacher!

DAVE BAST

He has very little to do with me,” or do we say, “No, no; he is the light of the world;” in fact, John says, interestingly, “He is the true light who enlightens everyone.” So, he is not just the light of Christians; he is not just the light of those who follow him; he is the light of those who reject him, too. They just choose to prefer the darkness.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that loops back to what we said about that early verse in John 1 in the first segment, and Dale Bruner, the commentator, calling attention to the present tense verb: The light *shines*, still is *shining*, it *shines* in the darkness, and it is still shining in the darkness today.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely, and Scott, you mentioned the Baptist – John’s testimony – he bore witness to the light, and one of the ways the light shines is through those who point to it still today, and that is what we want to talk about in our last segment.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are digging in – in a Christmas mood here – looking at John Chapter 1, and we just want to be reminded of something that we read in the first segment from John 1:6, where the Gospel writer John writes:

There came a man who was sent from God and his name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸Now, he himself (that is, John the Baptist) 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.

John the Baptist, in a lot of art, especially medieval art, is often pictured with a very long, bony finger pointing to Jesus, and that is what John the Evangelist, the writer of the Gospel, is saying: Do not confuse John the Baptist with the true Messiah. He came with a long, bony finger, and his main job was to say: There, that is the light; Jesus: That is the light.

DAVE BAST

Do not follow me, follow Jesus, as the saying goes. That really sums up John’s ministry in a nutshell. In fact, later on in Chapter 1, if we were going to continue our reading of John 1, we would see John the Baptist with his disciples gathered around him as Jesus appears on the scene following his baptism, pointing to Jesus and saying, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” *Agnus dei qui tollis peccata mundi*. It became part of the Christian liturgy early on, and that is John’s testimony in a nutshell. He is bearing witness to the light, and that was the reason for which he came; and in a sense, we are all called to that role, aren’t we, as followers of Jesus, we are to bear witness to his light. That is how the light continues to shine.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is what we do for each other. The light gets passed on. It is no accident, probably, that at Pentecost tongues of flame, which are a source of light like a candle, as we have been talking about in this show, were one of the first things that appeared over the Apostles' heads; because, indeed, we all direct each other to the light.

When we think about what we thought about in the first segment of this show, Dave, about people who are in depression, sometimes it is even worse at Christmas. People who are sad; people who feel the darkness of evil closing in around them in the world; and we now bear the light of Christ to each other to say, "The Lord loves you. The Lord is with you. The light is still shining. It shines in the darkness for you." Now, we do not want to be namby-pamby and say, well, just saying that will make somebody's depression go away, but the idea that the light is still shining, and that we now all bear witness to that is so very, very important to keep doing because now the light lives also in us.

DAVE BAST

I think of all of these familiar, beloved Christmas carols that we sing at this time of year, and how much they talk about the light, and in a sense, our bearing witness as well. I mentioned, I think, earlier in the program *O, Little Town of Bethlehem*; *Silent Night*: All is calm, all is bright; round yon virgin Mother and Child; that is where the light is, where he is. Or my own particular favorite, which is *Hark, the Herald Angels Sing*, and it just weaves together these scriptural allusions; so, one of the stanzas says: Hail the heav'n-born Prince of Peace! Hail the Son of righteousness! Light and life to all he brings, ris'n with healing in his wings. So, that is the message, and I think we can share that, not only in words as we encourage one another – particularly those who may be in a dark period or a dark time of life – but in our actions as well. Let your light shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father; says Jesus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and we know here in John 1 that John – by starting with the words: In the beginning – was looping back to Genesis and to the creation. John does not say this directly in this first chapter, but we all know – it is sort of like playing not a single note on the piano keyboard; it is like playing a chord; you play, *in the beginning* and biblically literate people immediately hear: Let there be light, which was the very first thing that the word of God, who we now believe is Jesus, spoke. So Jesus, as the word of God, was the active voice of God doing all that talking in Genesis, and the first thing he said was, "Let there be light," and now in the New Testament, John says he is still saying that; and we have to say that to each other as we enter into peoples' darkness. As we enter into the dark places of this world, the first thing we always speak is: Let there be light. And now we know, let there be the light of Christ shining on you, and our great hope is that, as we have said, the gift of faith is there so that people's eyes are opened so that they can see that light and be drawn to that light because I think we are – we should be – drawn to all that is good and bright.

DAVE BAST

Well, you know the same Jesus who said, "I am the light of the world," said to his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount, "*You* are the light of the world," so...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Turning it around.

DAVE BAST

Yes; if you want to have the one, you also have to accept the other. Part of our responsibility is to live lives that shine with light; that shine with goodness; that bubble over with joy and good cheer; and even if we are slogging through a dark time or a dark period or dark circumstances – certainly, it can get the best of us for a time – but, I do not know; I just remembered a line from an old slave preacher who was once asked if Jesus had ever laughed, and he said, "I don't know about that, but he sure fixed me so I could." For us, deep down we know that all is well because the light of the world has come into our world; he has come into our lives, and he is shining in us and he can shine through us; and perhaps through us, dispel a little bit of the darkness

that someone else is experiencing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is so important because one of the saddest caricatures that could ever be made of Christians, and it is even more sad in case there is reason to do it – one of the saddest caricatures as Christians is dark and dour people; people who are a downer; and these passages that we have looked at on *Groundwork* today, Dave, remind us that we are supposed to be joyful people full of goodness and radiating the light of Jesus in a very dark world that is just as dark now in many ways as it was; it still needs: Let there be light.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. We are your hosts, Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. So, visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what you would like us to dig into next on *Groundwork*.

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