

“Images of Jesus: “I am the Light of the World”

Mary Henderson Bowman

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“I am the light of the world,” says Jesus.

Jesus said this at a time when light was highly valued and imbued with mystery and power.¹

In our modern age, it is harder to think about light in the same way, since we can typically create light ourselves with the mere flick of a switch.

As we consider Jesus’ claim to be the light of the world, we may find it helpful to think about the times when we have appreciated light in the world.

The times that I most appreciate the power of light are the times when I am sitting in a darkness that I cannot control.

Think with me about a time when we have sat in total darkness because the power has gone out and the switch no longer works.

There is nothing like sitting in a dark house with no power to quickly appreciate the gift of light.

Similarly, we all experience the seasonal shifts of light and dark as the days shorten and lengthen. It is in the shorter days of winter, when darkness presses in, that I am reminded how much I appreciate light.

And it is when I have had a night of tossing and turning in the dark that I love seeing the dawning rays of the light shine into the windows — knowing they represent a re-setting of my emotions and my perspective.

There is truth to the idea that things really do look different in the light of day.

Occasionally it is helpful for us to look at the Greek word that the New Testament author uses in a passage. There are different words in Greek for light, but the one that is being used for “the light of the world” describes something that shines and that makes things manifest.²

In other words, light has an incredible way of revealing things.

When Jesus shines in the world, He makes things “clear.” He makes them “evident.” He makes things “apparent.”³ We get enlightened. Something becomes illuminated in a way that brings understanding. One of the places we often need understanding is about ourselves and others.

We can never fully know ourselves without God’s help.

¹ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, “Light,” 444.

² Strong’s Lexicon, G5457.

³ Merriam-Webster, “manifest,” www.merriam-webster.com

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God knows us better than we know ourselves, and God is gracious to reveal those parts of ourselves to us when we listen.

There have been many times in my life when God has helped reveal something to me, either about myself or about a situation that I simply didn't understand.

I see this sometimes in myself when I am triggered by something.

What I mean by a trigger is when I notice that my reaction to something is totally “oversized” to the situation. I overreact . . . perhaps a burst of anger that doesn't match the situation or perhaps an excessive defensiveness that even I notice.

After I say my apologies, I have found it extremely helpful to go and sit in prayer and simply ask . . . “okay God, what was that about?” “Why did I overreact in that way?”

When I sit and listen prayerfully, God has graciously will make manifest to me what is really going on. God has made clear what part of me got stirred and why. Often God takes me back to an old hurt that I didn't know was there or that I thought I had dealt with. God invites me to forgive if that is needed and then in a way that only God can, God pours God's love on that old hurt and something shifts.

God is always inviting deeper life with God.

As we heard in our first reading, Jesus is called the Life-Light.⁴

Another translation says it this way . . . “What has come into being in Him was life, and the life was the light of all people.”⁵

Science has helped us understand that light is essential for life.

We now know that without light, plants cannot grow.

Photosynthesis requires light.

In the same way, we need spiritual light to grow into our true selves and become children of the light.

God invites us to be our true selves, our child of God selves.

Our world puts pressure on us to be false, to keep things hidden, and to wear masks rather than simply being honest about where we are.

We can walk in fear and comparison, rather than in love.

⁴ John 1 (The Message)

⁵ John 1 (NRSVUE)

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We think we have to be perfect, instead of living freely in the power of God’s love and forgiveness. Darkness has its way.

If light captures the ideas of goodness and truth and love and faith, then darkness is what stands in opposition to God’s purposes.

As one scholar puts it: “Darkness subdues and restricts but light revitalizes and frees by scattering the darkness, illuminating the world, arousing those who sleep and allowing humans to carry out their lives.”⁶

If we are honest, we are creatures of darkness and light.

There is a index for human behavior that runs that from darkness to light and human beings range all along that spectrum.

But God is ever inviting us back into the light, back into our best selves, back into “our God-selves.”

Jesus has brought light into a world of darkness and has promised that the darkness will not overcome it.

Light has invaded the darkness to reveal God’s love and God’s salvation.

The fear of darkness is one of the oldest fears.

We fear what we cannot see.

We fear what the darkness can hold.

And yet Jesus tells us that the light has come.

If you are sitting in darkness, then come into the light for the dawn is breaking.

On that Easter morning long ago when the women walked to the tomb in the darkness of the night and in the darkness of their grief, they could not know how the sun would dawn that day.

The Episcopal priest Becca Stevens⁷ captures it this way . . .

“Sunrise in the story of Easter is not just a time of day; it is a state of heart. Sunrise is the space where nighttime fears move aside for hope . . . knowing that the light will never leave us.”

⁶ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, “*Images of Jesus*,” 444-445.

⁷ Center for Action and Contemplation Newsletter, “Resurrection and Incarnation,” April 4, 2024.