

## Light of the World

By show of hands: Who has ever felt afraid of the dark? And for anyone not raising their hand: Who's struggling with honesty? Right?! Being afraid of the dark, it's such a common human experience. But, when you think about it, in moments of the shudder of fear that darkness creates, have you ever noticed that it's not the dark we're truly afraid of? It's actually what the dark means. What the dark does. Limiting our visibility, making things hard to see, and inducing a fear of what *might be in the dark*, or, *how lost and disoriented we could become because of the dark*. I think that's what's at the heart of our common experience of being afraid of the dark. And if you've ever had that feeling, I think you'll relate to the characters of our story today as we continue our series called ***Knowing God by Name***.

If you've been tracking with us the last couple weeks you know we're on a journey of getting to know the most prominent and profound name that the God revealed in the Bible gave Himself – ***"I AM" (Exodus 3:14)***. And, you know that our journey is leading us right to Jesus who used this very name for himself in a variety of ways, last week through Jesus's declaration, saying: ***"I am the bread of life."*** (John 6:35). And today, we're going to continue the journey of getting to know the God revealed in Jesus by name through the story of Jesus as told in the Gospel of John. But like the first two weeks of this series, the story and name of Jesus that we want to zoom in on today actually began long before the time of Jesus, thousands of years earlier, through the story of the exodus of the ancient people of Israel.

Two weeks ago, Tom Loewen recounted the story of Moses meeting God through the mystery of a burning bush. And this was where God first shared His name with Moses – the name He wanted Moses to tell the people – that He is the God known as "I AM." And, that *I AM* wanted to free His people from slavery in Egypt. Well, fast forward through the movies ***The Ten Commandments*** or ***The Prince of Egypt*** and *I AM* worked miraculous wonders to release Israel from their slavery and start them on a journey to the Promised Land.

However, if you know the story, shortly after Israel found themselves freed from slavery on the other side of the Red Sea, they quickly discovered that they were lost, and seemingly alone, and especially at night, consumed by the darkness and disorientation of the wilderness. That is, until *I AM* once again revealed His presence through the power of fire.

In **Exodus 13:20-22**, we read:

*After leaving Sukkoth they camped at Etham on the edge of the desert. By day Yahweh went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and **by night in a pillar of fire to give them light**, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.*

Friends, this pillar of fire became the symbol of *I AM*'s presence with the people *and* their *literal guiding light* through the darkness of the wilderness. And thousands of years later – now coming into the time of Jesus – the people of Israel still remembered and annually celebrated God's presence and provision in this time through their annual **Festival of Shelters** (or Sukkoth). This was a massive festival that the people of Israel celebrated each fall at the time of harvest. Thousands of people would travel to Jerusalem, but for this festival, they wouldn't stay in the city. No, to commemorate the Festival of Shelters, the people would set up tents around the outskirts of the city to live in shelters for all seven days to remember that God provided for them during their ancestors' 40-year camp out in the wilderness.

And this festival was a party. Think *Grape & Wine* but everybody literally camps out in Montebello for the week! Can you imagine?! And to kick the whole thing off, the Festival of Shelters began with the **Torch Light Ceremony** – a ceremony in the Women's Court of the temple where, at dark, four massive candelabras were lit that were said to "*light up every courtyard in Jerusalem*", all as a symbol of *I AM*'s pillar of fire in the wilderness as well as the "light" of the Law that was then handed down through Moses. And after the illumination ceremony, there was a dance party all night in the temple courts to set the tone for the 7-day party across scads of shelters all lit up by torches night after night. This party was *lit*, literally.

And while we read that Jesus was actually late to the party, he was about to make the *claim of the party* that would change the way people could know God by name forever.

For some context, we'll start reading in **John 7:14 & 37 (and then 8:12)**, where it says:

*Not until halfway through the Festival did Jesus go up to the temple courts and begin to teach...*

*On the last and greatest day of the Festival...*

*When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, **"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."***

Friends, to Jesus's original audience, this would have been a shocking and upending claim to everything they had just spent a week remembering and celebrating. First, that Jesus – as throughout this series – intentionally used the phrase *"I AM"* to link himself with the name of the God revealed in the burning bush to Moses and experienced powerfully through the pillar of fire by Israel. But then to declare that he – *Jesus* – is in fact the light of the world that lights up all of the darkness of life. You can read of the controversy this created among those around Jesus, controversy littered throughout the whole context of his claims in John chapters 7-9. But for many, the controversy sparked hope. Because although the people celebrated how *I AM* had lit up the darkness of the past, so many once again found themselves lost and afraid in the darkness of the present. Politically oppressed under Roman rule. Spiritually condemned by self-righteous religious leaders. Often struggling through famine and poverty and illness and expulsion from the very people of faith that apparently knew the light.

And then they heard Jesus say: **"I am the light of the world."** That the light *isn't* some distant, ancient, long-lost pillar. That the light *isn't* the sacred candles or fires in the temple, guarding or restricting God's presence. That the light *isn't* the Law or the Teachers of the Law, even if they were to be a lamp unto their feet. No... Jesus said: *"I am..."* *"I am"* the God you're celebrating... *"I am"* the pillar of fire... *"I am"* the presence in the temple... *"I am"* the Word of God... *"I am"* the Light in *your* darkness... Because **"I am the light of the world."**

Friends, as we aspire to know God by name, where are you feeling lost in the dark? Because who we can see and come to know in Jesus is *the God* who lights up the world. *The God* who we can *know* as the light of the world. *The God* whose light brings all of life into focus. *The God* who promises that whoever follows him will *never* walk in darkness. And, *the God* who we can know by name in the person of Jesus, the true and eternal light of the world.

So where are you feeling lost in the dark? Where do you feel like you are wandering in the wilderness? Where do you feel like you just can't see what's ahead of you or where you should go? Where do you feel disoriented? Where do you feel afraid? What decision are you facing that has no clear answer? What relationship seems stuck without a next step? What doubt has you paralyzed from everything you thought you once knew? What diagnosis or recent loss has you wondering whether there's a light of hope at the end of the tunnel?

Friends, the good news today is that the God we long to know by name does in fact have a name: it's Jesus. Jesus who is the light that lights up the darkness. Jesus who stands above and brighter than any other light we may want to follow. And we have all kinds of other lights we tend to look to or follow.

I'll say this gently for some of us, but the capital "L" *Light* is not the Bible. The capital "L" *Light* is not the Church. (Although both are intended to be reflectors of the Light.) The Light is not religion. The Light is not the "sinner's prayer". The Light is not good theology. Not family values. Not meditation, not yoga, and not "5 tips to a happy life". The Light is not the media – surprise, surprise – mainstream or social. The Light is not politics, not liberal or conservative or your favourite alternative. The Light is not the right job, the right partner, the right pay cheque, or the right therapist. Not the right family, not your parents, not your friends. Not the right Enneagram type, not the latest book you're reading, not your favourite podcast. Not substances, not technology, not science, not the gym, not education, and not whatever else along these lines we might look to as the "Light" of our lives.

No, friends, what I want us to hear today is that Jesus is the Light. So what if we looked to Jesus? What if we followed him as the Light of our lives? How might he lead us out of darkness and reveal to us the Light of the God we so desperately long to know?

If you're interested in more fully knowing Jesus as *your* Light, there's a few things I'd encourage you to consider today. First, **read** about the life, teaching, person, work, death and resurrection of Jesus in one of the Gospels. Why not start with the Gospel of John that we're looking at through this series? If you tried reading one chapter a day, you'd work your way through the whole book in the next three weeks.

Or, how about **praying** to Jesus? If Jesus is risen like we celebrated at Easter, the New Testament writers witness that his Spirit is with us at all times, eager to listen to us and speak into our lives. As one of my favourite prayer teachers says, the key to prayer is getting to the place of "sitting with Jesus." What if you spent even a few minutes today in prayer, quieting yourself, asking Jesus to be with you, expressing some of your needs or your fears of your current darkness to him? And then sit and wait to sense his presence or hear his voice or see his guiding light in your life.

I also encourage you to **talk** with others about Jesus. Jesus once told his followers, *where two or three are gathered in his name, surely, he is with them*. Talk about Jesus. Ask others what they see in Jesus. Ask others what Jesus is helping them to see. Ask others what Jesus may be inviting you to see. And if you don't know who to ask, you could join one of our Life Groups that aim to talk about Jesus regularly.

And one more for today, **serve** others in need. Jesus famously said that when we feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, or visit the prisoner, we serve and get to know *him*. That we can actually see and know the Light more fully in some of the most unexpected, surprising, or seemingly darkest places, if we'll humbly, generously, and sacrificially look for him there. And that's everything our anchor causes are about.

I don't know where you're feeling lost in the dark these days, but Jesus invites you to know him as the Light. For me, there *are* some ways I've been afraid of the dark recently. Many of you know this has been a heavy and complicated and challenging season in our church, particularly for us, as a leadership, and among our staff. Frankly, I've never had such an extended stretch in my life, where trying to see what's in front of me has been so difficult. While there is so much goodness at all times, there *are* moments that have felt like darkness as well. And though I'm inclined, like all of us, to look toward *other lights* from time to time, in this season – somewhat like a journey through the wilderness – I gotta tell you that when I look to Jesus, I see and experience *a Light* that keeps showing the way. A Light that says, *I am with you*. A Light that whispers, *don't be afraid*. A Light that says, *blessed are the peacemakers and love your enemies*. A Light that says – and demonstrated – *we are here to serve and not be served*. A Light that says, *always look at the plank in your own eye before the speck in anyone else's*. A Light that says, *those who try to save their own life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it*. A Light that is always present as our daily resource, our daily strength and sustenance, a Light that is *our daily bread*.

And while, even with the Light, not every next move or decision or step in the journey always appears crystal clear, *the Light* keeps on shining. *The Light* stays ahead of us. *The Light* continues to warm us. *The Light* guards and protect us. *The Light* invites us to follow. *The Light* guide us toward the path. And *the Light* says, he will lead us to life... Even eternal life. As *the Light* that has ultimately overcome pain, and sin, and evil, and even death, so that one day all things will be made new – and all darkness will be banished forever – in the Eternal Light of God.

Friends, my prayer is this, that we may know Jesus as *the* Light of the world. The Light *of God* and the Light *to God*, the God we can know by Name. Let's pray.