

Jesus, the Light of the World  
John 8:12-20  
March 13, 2022 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC  
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Back in January, Dave and I spent the night in White River Junction, Vermont. We got up early the next morning to return home, so that we could retrieve our dog Susie from the kennel in time to avoid another night's boarding fee. It was really, really, ... really ... cold that morning, about 20 below zero, and there were ice crystals hanging in the air above us.

The sun was just coming up as we left the hotel, and for about 20 minutes, we were driving directly toward it. It was blinding. And then, the road turned just a little, and suddenly there were rainbows all around us. Except it wasn't just one big arc, but dozens of "rain sticks" – just the piece of the rainbow that stands vertically as it comes to earth. Dave said it looked like a pot of gold should be at the end of it.

As we drove along, these prisms moved with us, so that it appeared that every home, every small farm, every tree, every convenience store we passed had experienced this particular blessing, the light of God dancing over it.

It was just as cold in Center Harbor that morning, and I wondered where you would have to stand to see the light of God dancing over our church, too. I bet somebody was up early enough to see that.

There is a lot of talk about light in the Bible, as we heard in the call to worship this morning, and a lot of those references to light are in the Gospel of John. The community for which this gospel was written called themselves children of light, and they thought of themselves as people who walked in light instead of in darkness. It is a beautiful image, isn't it?

So, in today's passage, Jesus says, "I am the light of the world." This is one of the "I AM" statements that recur throughout this gospel. I am the bread of life. I am the way, the truth, and the life. I am the good shepherd. Each of these statements points in two directions. The I AM part of the statement refers back to God's conversation with Moses at the burning bush, where God's name for all generations is revealed: "Tell them that I AM has sent you." God says.

These I AM statements are supposed to show us that Jesus is God Incarnate, Emmanuel, God with Us. And we can tell by the references in many of the second halves of these I AM statements that they point us in another direction – to the worship of the people of Israel. They

show that Jesus is the fulfillment of all the people's worship over the centuries.

In this scripture, the reference is to the Feast of the Tabernacles, in which four large lamps were lit in the Temple Court of the Women at the end of the first festival day. They were so bright that they lit up the whole city of Jerusalem. Celebrants at Tabernacles danced before those candlesticks with burning torches, adding even more light to the celebration.

Think of that – a festival that fills the whole city with light. Jesus is the joyous fulfillment of this dancing with light. He says, "I am the light of the whole world." "I AM," he says – the name of God Almighty, "I AM the light of the world." Not just the light of this glorious holy city, but the light of all the world. And he promises the light of life to all who follow him.

Immediately after Jesus' proclamation, he is challenged by Pharisees to prove what he has said. Remember I told you last week that if I had lived in Jesus' day, I would have made a really good Pharisee, because I want expectations to be clear and unambiguous, as the Pharisees did, and because they believed that doing things the proper way, as prescribed in holy text, was their calling from God. So, I have some

sympathy for the Pharisees here. They are not only human, trying to understand something that is purely divine, but they are limited by their need for order in their world, as I am.

The Pharisees come at Jesus with a legal dispute about his claim to be the light of the world. They say, you can't testify on your own behalf. You need evidence. According to the law, you need two witnesses to prove your claim.

Jesus responds, "I testify on my own behalf, and my Father who sent me testifies on my behalf." The Pharisees, like all mortals in the gospel, take Jesus' saying literally and ask where his Father is, so they can presumably call Jesus' father to testify for him. Then Jesus says, "If you knew me you would know my Father also." That is, Jesus reveals God to us.

There it is. Now we are right back to the gorgeous, colorful light that blessed our trip from White River Junction in January. A prism doesn't change light. It simply reveals to us the beautiful colors that are always present in it. We just can't see them unless ice crystals are hanging in the air on a bright cold morning, or we suspend crystals in our windows at home for the light to shine through.

Jesus is the prism through which we can see God, in all God's glory and beauty. The light of God is always around us, but we are just not always aware of it. So, it is a blessing whenever the light of God shines into our world in a way that we can see it. Jesus is that way. Jesus reveals God's beautiful light to us.

Now, in the Gospel of John we hear that Jesus is the light of the world. But in the Gospel of Matthew, right after the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says to his followers, "YOU are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do you light a candle and put it under a bushel, but on a candle stick, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine that all may see your good works and glorify God in heaven." Jesus is the light of the world because God's light shines through him. WE can be the light of OUR world when we see the light of God in Jesus and refract that light back out into our community.

Back in January, I wondered where you would have to stand to see the blessing of that rainbow over our church. I am sure you can see it if you walk in the door when we worship. You can see the light of God on every face. You can see it, too in all the ways we reach out to our community, with food for the food pantry and helping hands for the soup kitchen, with support for Habitat for Humanity and the women's

shelter. If we let people know what we are doing in our worship and in our community and why we are doing it, they will see the light of God in us.

As a church and as individuals, may our light so shine that all may see our good works and glorify God in heaven.

Amen