

Light Up the World!

Sermon 182 | Greystone Baptist Church | April 30, 2023

John 8:1-12

I am the light of the world! Jesus says in John 8:12.

It is the second of seven “I am” statements which are found in John’s Gospel. The first occurs in chapter 6 when Jesus says “I am the bread of life,” (6:35) and later in the same chapter, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven,” (6:41).

Fun fact / Did you know:

The “I am” statements often correspond with a religious festival and a miracle, which John will call “signs.” So, before the “I’m the bread of life,” statement, the Passover festival is near and Jesus multiplies five loaves of bread and two fish in order to feed five thousand people with the lunch of one young boy.

So what’s the context for “I am the light...”? Well, the coming festival is called the Festival of Booths. It was a celebration of light remembering and honoring the way that God led the people through the dark wilderness through the pillar of fire by night. You see, without electricity, propane generators, battery-powered flashlights, or the little flashlight button on a smartphone, the Israelites were completely in the dark once the sun went down... unless someone lit a fire. So for those 40 years, God lit the fire and led the people through their wilderness journey.

To commemorate that transformational experience, each year during the Festival of Booths, the Temple, which had massive bowls of oil set up on its four corners, would fill those bowls with thousands of wicks and oil. And during the festival, they would light all of those wicks on fire so that they would burn brightly through the night. “The temple lit up, and on the mountain, could be seen for miles, a kind of experience of light that would not be known in the ancient world outside of this sort of event. In the midst of this remembrance, Jesus proclaims himself to be lighting up the world.”¹

“I am the light of the world...”

These, the first words out of Jesus’ mouth after the infamous incident with the woman thrust into the spotlight of judgment.

You know what’s wild? Of all the times I have read and heard this story - the one about the “woman caught in adultery” - I never realized it happened in the shadow of the temple. I guess I’d always imagined it playing out in a marketplace or something but never thought about it being on the steps of God’s house. In fact, there are a lot of things that might surprise us about this story. It is one of those really well-known stories from the Bible. We quote it all the time - especially the part about “Let he without sin, cast the first stone.” We have dramatized the sounds of the stones falling from the hands of the angry (or perhaps just energized) crowds as they prepare to literally cast their judgment on this lowly woman.

¹ Karoline Lewis. *John*. p116.

As much as we love to tell this story, it's odd that it isn't in the revised common lectionary. Meaning it is not included in the global church's three-year plan for worship and preaching. Furthermore (and some of you may have caught this if you read the text from a study Bible in preparation for worship today), this whole episode that makes up verses 1-11, the whole story of the woman is bracketed by parentheses because - get this - it isn't in the earliest, most reliable manuscripts of John's Gospel. None of them. And, until the 900s, this story does not appear in Western Commentaries on the Gospel.

In fact, most scholars now agree with Dr. Raymond Brown's assessment (Y'all remember Dr. Raymond Brown right, Caralie's husband, renown New Testament scholar, taught some of you in seminary, I believe). Most scholars now agree with his assessment that this story (the one we read today) was a late addition to the original Gospel, placed right in the middle of Jesus' experience in Jerusalem during the Festival of Booths, the celebration of light.

So, as the text reads now - with the addition of this story - Jesus is teaching in the Temple courts when the Pharisees bring before him a woman who was "caught in the act" of adultery. John tells us outright that this was a trap. But still, the questions rush into our minds as quickly as the woman was thrust into the scene.

Caught in the act, huh? The urgency of the situation rises as the Pharisees demand answers. But where is her partner? Doesn't the law say that he should be stoned to death too? The audience wants answers and they look to Jesus - again, as a trap - to jump to a conclusion as quickly as they "press in" on him. But Jesus slows the whole thing down. Refusing an easy answer, he bends down and begins to write on the ground.

Much ink has been spilled speculating what Jesus may have been writing. Was it the names of the individuals who had gathered around, maybe the names of the Pharisees who drug the woman in to face her fate? Was it the names of their sins? Did Jesus write the ten commandments or maybe was he listing all 613 mitzvot, laws the Hebrew people were supposed to keep? Did Jesus draw a picture of the Temple as he scribbled in the ground? If so, did he also include the flames blazing from the four corners? Did he write the word "love"? Or was it something else?

The truth is we will never know for sure what Jesus wrote in the dirt. But what we do know is that Jesus' action slowed everything to a halt. As he knelt down to write in the dirt, the crowd of Pharisees and religious leaders pressed him for an answer... Urging him toward swift judgment of this woman. No time for questions, for reflection, for understanding or for empathy... only judgment.

As Jesus wrote, the crowd kept on questioning him until he stood up and said, "If any of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone."

You can almost hear the percussive thud of rocks falling from the hands of would-be accusers, as Jesus bends back down to scribble in the sand. Once the crowd had dispersed and the woman was alone with Jesus, he stood back up to address her as more than just a sinner; this would be the first time in the story that she is seen as more than her mistake or her situation (the truth is, we do not know if she was a willing participant in the crime or not). Regardless of all that remains unknown, Jesus addresses her not as an object waiting for judgment, but as a human being, broken and longing for love, just like everyone else. "I am the light of the world!" Jesus says as abruptly as the woman was thrown into the scene.

But wait, isn't the Temple supposed to bear the light? Could it be that the Temple had traded its light for judgment somewhere along the way? Could that be why this story about slowing down - NO - stopping our judgment altogether - interrupts Jesus' teaching at the Temple? Is that why Jesus says, "I am the light," when everybody knows the Temple is supposed to be the light? Is the late addition of this story trying to tell us that 900 years later, the early church had become something it was never meant to be - a house of judgment rather than a beacon of light?

Susan Shaw, who is a professor at Oregon State University, an ordained Baptist minister, and a senior columnist for Baptist News Global published a provocative article this last week that basically asks the same question of today's church. Quoting one of her professors from Southern Seminary she writes:

"Good ideas become institutions in order to sustain the idea, but eventually sustaining the structures becomes more important than the initial idea."

Continuing with her own question: Perhaps the institution [meaning the church] has moved so far away from the initial idea that it now exists only to sustain itself... Maybe it's time to set aside any notions we have of what church is and start over with the initial idea. What was that idea? (she asks...) Jesus was pretty clear. It was love.²

Shaw, much like Jesus in the scene with the woman, suggests that the church needs to pause its unrelenting pace of programming and projects and instead ask some critical questions. Here are some of the questions she suggests:

What if we... asked people what they need - especially the people in the communities around us?

What if we stopped trying to convert people and simply lived in love toward them, met their needs, offered our unconditional friendship and support, took on their issues, helped make the world better for them? Would they see Jesus in us then?

What if we asked how we could work together for justice? Perhaps that could become the unifying center of the church.

After all, for Jesus, the communal practice of love was [...] justice. For Jesus, the two were never separate. He asked people to live love in their personal relationships and to do justice as the practice of love on a larger scale. Imagine if Christians were to commit to having every action guided by the most loving thing we can do in [any] given situation. Imagine if we sided with the oppressed, spoke truth, did justice, showed grace and mercy, lived in joy. Imagine if we worked together with all people of goodwill to transform the [...] structures that perpetuate inequality, violence, and harm. Imagine it!

Imagine the Christian church of the twenty-first century re-gathering the proverbial wicks as people from all walks of life, all political affiliations, all professions and educational paths, all racial and ethnic backgrounds, all professions, all citizenship statuses, all socio-economic statuses, all of us, each and every one.... with all of our range of gifts and abilities...

² Susan Shaw. <https://baptistnews.com/article/struggling-to-believe/>

What if we all could see the light of love blazing strong from the corners of the temple and knew that our love would be welcome there too? What if we became a bowl, a container large enough to hold all the wicks so that the light of love - God's light - could shine - not despite us - but IN and THROUGH us? Wouldn't that be a miracle?

I am the light of the world, Jesus said. The Temple was supposed to be, was intended to be, but it traded the light of love for the shadow of judgment somewhere along the way. Maybe the church did too. I am the light of the world, Jesus said, and I am standing here, trying to teach you, ready to anoint you, NO, cover you with holy oil so that you might allow my light, the light of God, to blaze in and through you.

But you've gotta set down that judgment stone first, so your hands are free to hold the wick. I am the light, Jesus said. Come... follow me... and let's light up the world.