



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

I am the Light of the World

SCRIPTURE:
John 8:12-20

January 15, 2023 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

Friends, here is the setting for Jesus' second "I am" statement. We're in Jerusalem at the temple during the Feast of the Tabernacles or the Feast of the Tents. The Feast of the Tabernacles or Tents remembers the liberation of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt. On the way to the promised land, during the 40 years in the wilderness, they were on the move so they lived in tents or tabernacles. The Feast of the Tabernacles is one of the three great pilgrimage festivals—meaning that for these festivals, all able-bodied women and men must travel to Jerusalem to the temple.

Jesus is speaking while he is in the treasury of the temple, which is adjacent to the women's courtyard, which was the largest courtyard in the temple complex. I want you to picture this. During the Festival of the Tabernacles, there were four huge, gold lampstands. One of them was placed in each of the corners of the women's courtyard. These lampstands were 18 feet high. Each of the stands supported four huge, gold bowls filled with oil. According to the Gemara (one of the ancient Jewish texts), each bowl held many gallons of oil—enough to burn all night. During the day, priests would climb ladders to fill the bowls with precious oil; then, at dusk, they would light them. These gold lampstands, each with four huge bowls of oil, would light up all of Jerusalem. One witness said it was so bright, the whole city was illuminated and the glow in the skies above Jerusalem could be seen from the coast, which is 47 miles away.

It is in this setting that Jesus says his second "I am" statement. He says, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." Today, with all of our easy access to light, at all hours, Jesus saying he is 'the light of the world' may not seem so significant but in the ancient world—and for the Hebrew people during the Festival of Tabernacles—Jesus' words are pro-

found. Light in the midst of darkness has power.

Many of you know that I am the second of four boys and early on, Dad and Mom both taught us to love camping—first, on the beaches in Hawaii and then in Mt. Rainier National Park in Washington state. Our summer, after visiting the grandparents in California, was to camp for a week or two at Mt. Rainier. It was perfect for four boys. We would go hiking or just play around the campground all day.

While we were camping there for the week, one night Dad would take us out for a hike—just us boys without Mom who by that time, really just needed a break from us. We would ask Dad if Mom was coming with us and he would tell us clearly that Mom was not. Then we would ask if she would be lonely without us and Dad would tell us, "Mom will be fine." In fact, she wants him to take us on a long, night hike.

He would wait for a cloudy night so there was no moonlight. And he would tell us to leave our flashlights behind because he had his big lantern and because we are not the brightest of God's children, we would obey him. We would leave our Mom sitting at the picnic table with her Reader's Digest condensed book by the bright Coleman lantern—the kind that had those mantles that would burn bright but not be burning... one of those great mysteries. She would be sitting under the bright yellow and blue awning. That was the last we would see of her as we followed our dad with his big light. We would be hiking and take turn after turn and soon we would be in the pitch darkness.

Then, our father would remind us that on these cloudy nights, a particular one-eyed grizzly bear liked to come out and roam around Mt. Rainier National Park. We would ask him, "Dad, what happened to this grizzly bear's eye?" And Dad would tell us that a long time ago, a little Japanese-American boy threw a rock at the bear and took out his eye.

Ever since then, he had a particular hatred for Japanese-American little boys. “Well, maybe it was an accident?” one of my brothers would say. And Dad would say, “Well, I don’t think it matters to the bear.”

He would go on to explain that the bear loved to eat Japanese-American little boys not only for revenge but also because we eat so much fish, so much sushi, that we are kind of like a surf and turf package. The bear gets seafood and meat all together. We are delicious to grizzly bears. Then our father, bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh, on this dark night, would turn off his light and he would say, “Well, this is strange, boys. My light is not working all of a sudden. I could have sworn I just put a new battery in it just before we left on this hike.” “But now we can’t see anything, Dad,” we would say. “I know, boys,” he would say, “But at least we’re here together.”

Then our father, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, would take a large stone he had placed in his pocket before we started out on the hike and he would throw it into the woods next to us. We would say, “What was that?” And our father, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, would say, “I don’t know but it sure sounded big and close.” Then our father, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, would throw another larger stone into the woods next to us and we would yell in terror. Then our father, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, standing in the midst of his sons, would stop talking. “Dad? Dad? Um, Dad? Where are you?”

So then, we were trying to search for him and unbeknownst to us, he is quietly backing away trying not to laugh. Then Jason, the oldest would say, “What has happened to Dad?” Then Garfield, the third brother who had sort of an Eeyore personality, would say, “He’s been eaten.” I would say, “What? Garfield, he hasn’t been eaten.” “Yes, he has,” Garfield would say. “Mom is now a widow and we are half orphans.” Then Brandon, who is the youngest, would start to cry, saying, “I don’t want to be half orphans!” Then Garfield would say, “The bear has probably eaten Mom, too, so now we are total orphans.” And Brandon would wail and I would be trying to

reach out to Garfield to get him to stop talking. Then Jason would grab Brandon and we would just run. We would be tripping over rocks and bushes and running into tree branches. But then, miracle of miracles, we would turn a corner and see the bright yellow and blue awning and our Mom safely sitting under it reading. We would run out of the forest and all four of us would climb on to her because not even a mean, one-eyed grizzly bear can hurt you when you are touching your Mom.

And Mom would sigh, put down her Reader’s Digest condensed book and ask, “Boys, where is your father?” Then Garfield would, of course, answer, “He’s been eaten and you are a widow.” And Brandon would start crying again, “I don’t want to be an orphan.” Then, out of the woods, our father would appear—and this is how you know we are not the brightest of God’s children—we would see him and say, “You’re alive! It’s a miracle!” And we would leave Mom and run up and hug him. And Dad would be looking at Mom saying, “Alice, I don’t know what happened. One moment the boys are with me and then the next moment, we just sort of got separated.” Then Mom would say to Dad, “Dick, we need to talk in the tent.”

Light has incredible power. In the prologue to John’s gospel, he writes, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him and without him, not one thing came into being. And what came into being in him was life and the life was the light to all humankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

Whatever your deepest hunger, Jesus says, “I am the bread of life.” Whoever comes to me will never be hungry. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

Jesus says, “I am the light of the world.” Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not, and shall never, overcome it. Trust this.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.