

The I Ams of Jesus: The Light

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

Jan. 6, 2019 – AM Sermon

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John 1:1-9; 8:12

Jesus says, *“I am the light of the world, the person who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”* Such significant words, and to get to why they are significant, to see the full weight of them, let’s go on a journey together.

Thirty miles outside of Dublin, Ireland, there is an historical site called Newgrange. If you were to visit this site you would find a large man made hill, a circular mound pushing up out of a field in the Irish countryside. It’s about 45 feet high and 300 feet in diameter. It has grass on its rounded top, while its base is marked by a low stone wall. The mound is 5000 years old, older than Stonehenge, older than the pyramids. On the east side of the Newgrange hill, at its base, there is a doorway. The doorway is about three feet wide and it opens to a dark passage which goes about 60 feet into the center of the hill. The passage is narrow. Claustrophobic. It’s flanked by enormous stones that are just over a shoulder width apart. If you follow that narrow passage into the darkness, it will lead you to the center of Newgrange. There you will find a large center chamber rising a full 20 feet above your head. The chamber is constructed by a series of enormous stones laid on top of one another in a stair-step construction rising up to the center. When you stand in the middle of the room you are surrounded by 100,000 tons of stone. It’s an ancient burial chamber. The people of this civilization buried their dead in this place.

364 days a year, if you want to visit the center chamber of the Newgrange and see that amazing center space, you would need a flashlight. It’s pitch dark in that center chamber. On 364 days of the year, no light gets in. But on one day of the year, on December 21, at 8:58 in the morning, at the moment of the winter solstice when the sun reaches its southernmost point in the sky, a shaft of light perfectly penetrates that doorway. At the exact moment of the winter solstice that shaft of light, which is only 6 inches in diameter, shines all the way down the 60 foot passage and reaches the center chamber. For 17 minutes every year that inner chamber is lit by the light of the sun. This enormous mound was built for those 17 minutes. 5000 years ago these people built this enormous structure for the sake of those 17 minutes of light.

Think about how remarkable that is. These people lived subsistence lifestyles. For these early humans, especially in this northern climate, life was a constant struggle to gather food, to keep warm and to make sure that enemies were kept away. They existed on a knife’s edge. And yet these ancient people spent enormous energy and resources, energy and resources that could have been used for hunting and gathering, on building this mound. There are 97 stones at the base of Newgrange hill, laid end to end. They weigh up to 10,000 pounds each. Those stones would have been brought to the building site from the River Boyne. It’s a 20 minute walk up hill from the river to the mound. Those ancient people would have had to roll every one of those enormous stones inch by inch up that hill. So much time and passion and energy and determination must have gone into the building of this place. Why did these ancient people make this hill? Because they were longing for the light. They were looking for the light. God had placed eternity in their heart and their restless hearts were looking for the light. Of course, some of this religious longing has to do with their physical well-being. These people understood that the light of the sun warmed the earth and, made the crops grow, so some of their religious energy

is about imploring the gods for good harvests and healthy children. But it was more than that! Remember this was a burial mound. These people weren't just after good harvests, they were after meaning. They were trying to make sense of life and death and everything in between. They didn't roll those 5 ton boulders up the hill just because they wanted to fill their stomachs; they wanted to find a light for their hungry hearts.

And so it has always been for us human beings. We are creatures made in the image of God. God has placed eternity in our hearts and so we've always hungered for more than physical food. We need more than food, we need meaning! You can give a man a full fridge, a warm house, a garage full of toys, and all sorts of leisure time to use those toys, but if you don't give him food for his heart, if you don't show him what life is for, if you don't give him light for his darkness, he will not be content. So as long as there have been people, there has been religious expression. As long as there have been people there have been temples and shrines and rituals and prayers. As long as there have been people these people have lit candles and altar fires and torches and lamps as they searched for the light of the world.

Now Jesus stands in the middle of the temple, in the middle of history, and he says. *"I am the light of the world! The person who follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."* It's an amazing announcement and you can hear it on two levels. On one level this is a fulfillment of Israel's history and Israel's longings. For years the prophets had pointed to the coming of the light. Isaiah said, "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those walking in the land of the shadow a light has dawned." The Psalmists expressed their longing for the light: "Give light to my eyes or I will sleep in death!" said Psalm 13. "Lord, let the light of your face shine upon us," prayed Psalm 4.

Light was also part of the ceremony in Israel's temple. Remember where Jesus is standing when he speaks these words, he's in the temple, probably at the feast of tabernacles. In Jesus' day the feast of tabernacles included a special lamp lighting ritual. Large oil lamps were placed at the corners of one of the outer temple courts. These were big bowls of oil with a twisted linen garment in the middle functioning as a wick. These lamps were big enough and bright enough that their fire could be seen all over the city of Jerusalem. If you want to get a sense of the drama of what Jesus is saying here, you have to imagine Jesus standing in the midst of these four torches as he says 'I am the light of the world.'

But it's not just Israel's longing and Israel's hopes that are fulfilled. Jesus is the light of the world. He is the light that all people have been looking for: the ancient Irish tribe who rolling their stones up the hill from the river toward the Newgrange mound; the people of Cambodia in the 12th century building the massive temple of Angkor Wat stone by stone by stone, lighting their incense and their funeral pyres; the Mayan peoples carrying torches up their stair-stepped temples; the agnostic 20-something flipping through the social media posts on her phone, going from one site to the next, aimlessly, looking for something, her face lit up by the phone's dull glow. Jesus is the light that all these people need.

John 8:12 proclaims that the world's true light has come, and there has never been a light like Jesus. His light is not some grand cosmic force; that light has a face, that light has a name, and that light knows your name. The light comes to us not because we made such a perfect offering or built such a perfect temple. The light came to us because he loves us. The light doesn't just come to kings and high priests; he shines on children and outsiders, he shines on the beggars and the lepers. The light walked among us for 33 years, enduring our nonsense, all the while shining his love and grace. His light also shines on human sin, exposing hypocrisy and selfishness. We didn't like that so we rose up and tried to put out that light by nailing it to a

cross. But three days later we found out that this light was even stronger than we thought. This light was stronger than death. *“I am the light of the world. The person who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”* It’s an amazing claim, but honestly, when you start looking at the 2000 years of history between today and the temple you get a sense of how much light has come from this man. Jesus’ light really has changed the world.

The Declaration of Independence is one of the founding documents of our country, and one of the founding documents for all modern democratic states. It starts with the statement: *“We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights.”* Pretty much all modern western people, whether they are religious or not, read that statement and nod their head in agreement. “Yes! People are all equal. The king is no more or less of a person than the beggar on the corner.” For us that’s obviously true. But for most cultures and most of history that truth was not self-evident at all! Kings and nobles had noble blood. Poor people had common blood. It’s the Bible which said all people are created in the image of God. It is the gospel of Jesus that proclaims that *“in Christ there is no Jew or Gentile, no slave or free, no male or female, but all are one in Christ Jesus.”* Our beliefs about the dignity and worth of all people come from his light.

Jesus never led a political rally where he railed against the divisions of class and gender, but the way he and his followers treated women and the poor changed everything. There was an article in *First Things* last January about how the early church caused a sexual revolution in Roman society. When it came to sexuality, the Roman world had very different rules for men and women. Women were expected to be utterly faithful and utterly pure in their sexuality. Men on the other hand were allowed to do what they pleased without repercussions. The prostitutes were kept busy. A particularly terrifying fate awaited slaves. In those days slaves comprised between 10 – 15 % of the Empire’s population. Slavery held all sorts of terrors, and sexual abuse was one of the worst. Slaves were the property of their masters and the masters could do whatever they liked to their slaves without fear of punishment. You can imagine how terrible that must have been. But now here comes the gospel. Cities like Ephesus, Thessalonica and Rome hear that in Jesus, masters and slaves learn to see each other as brothers and sisters. They receive letters from Paul condemning sexual immorality. So slaveholders become Christians and, all of a sudden, the slaves see their master’s behavior change. No more abuse. It’s wonderful. It’s light in the darkness! They tell other slaves and pretty soon many slaves are drawn to Christ’s light. In the domestic realm wives see that when their husbands convert to Christianity they stop visiting prostitutes and start spending more time with them, treating them well for a change. It’s light in the darkness! They tell other wives and the gospel spreads. The light of the world starts to change relationships between gender and class.

Jesus never worked in a lab, and yet the modern scientific enterprise can be traced to the Judeo-Christian belief that nature is not a thing to be worshipped or feared; it is a gift of God, created in order, created with patterns and properties. Human beings can study these patterns and properties and when they find them and make them known, God is glorified.

Those examples are a tip of an iceberg. Every day the light of Jesus shines out in this world, and it falls on the lives of regular people, and when it does, those people do amazing things. They go to volunteer in homeless shelters. They make casseroles for the lonely and the grieving. They visit jails and spend time with criminals. They renovate homes so that the poor will have a place to live. They get in planes and fly to far away places to fight against child slavery and forced prostitution. They start schools and ministries in distant lands so that he light

of Jesus can shine on people who don't know him, so that those hungry people out there can find the light of life.

Dear friends, as the new year begins, as you take a step forward into 2019, I know that many of you are worried about what lies ahead. You are facing some overwhelming things and you wonder where your soul will find the strength. I can offer no better advice than to suggest that you turn your face towards Jesus and let his face shine upon you, to hear him say. "I am the light of the world. Follow me and you will not walk in darkness, but you will have the light of life."

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