

“I Am the Light of the World” (fn.:JOHN 8 12-16.2019.DOC)

Scripture: John 8:12-16

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Exodus 3:1-12: *Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.² There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.³ Then Moses said, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.”⁴ When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.”⁵ Then he said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”⁶ He said further, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.*

⁷ Then the LORD said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings,⁸ and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.⁹ The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them.¹⁰ So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”¹¹ But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”¹² He said, “I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.”

Our first reading is one of the signature passages of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament: Moses’ encounter with God at the burning bush. One of Moses’ major concerns is to know the name of God. Remember that the word “god” and even “lord” are not names—they are job descriptions, they are categories, they are identifications of responsibilities. Names are different—names are personal and connected to the individual. And names are powerful. Here is a mundane example—it is what is known as the “cocktail party effect.” You’re at a party—there is that constant roar of the voices and sounds that are a confused and unintelligible mix. However, if someone says your name, your hearing zeros in on that voice. Your name comes through that chaos and cacophony of noise.

Moses wants to know God’s name. If you know God’s name, then you can be sure that God will zero in on your voice. Moses gets an answer to his question...but it is an answer that only deepens the mystery of God. The Hebrew God has a first name: “I am” or even “I am who I am.” This name, incidentally, was mistranslated into English centuries ago as “Jehovah.” The more likely pronunciation of this Hebrew name is “Yahweh.” This name for God occurs hundreds of times in the Hebrew Bible—but our English translations follow the Jewish practice of substituting the word “lord” for this name of God. So, for example, the 23rd Psalm does not literally say “the Lord is my shepherd,” but rather—Yahweh, or Jehovah, or simply “I am”—is my shepherd.

“I am who I am”—that is the name that Moses receives. As we turn to the New Testament, particularly the Gospel of John, we find this divine name of “I am” on the lips of Jesus—Jesus who is the word of God, the rationale of God, the logos of God. Indeed, what we have in the Gospel of John is a teasing out of the meaning and content of the “I am.” The Gospel of John gives us seven distinct “I am” declarations. Since Easter, we have worked our way through four of these statements: I am the resurrection and life. I am the vine and you are the branches. I am the good shepherd. I am the gate of the sheepfold. And today, we come to the most repeated “I am” declaration in the Gospel of John: “I am the light of the world.”¹

Let us read one instance of this declaration (John 8:12-16):

¹ See also John 1:9, 3:19, 9:5, 12:35-36, 12:36

¹² Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." ¹³ Then the Pharisees said to him, "You are testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is not valid." ¹⁴ Jesus answered, "Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid because I know where I have come from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going." ¹⁵ You judge by human standards; I judge no one. ¹⁶ Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is valid; for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me.

One of the greatest human endeavors (perhaps our greatest?) is the hunger and thirst for understanding and knowledge. In facing cruelty, conflict, tragedy, unfairness, or whatever disturbance of this life comes our way, what is always close behind is the question of "why." Where there are untoward circumstances, the question of knowledge and understanding is not far behind. In contrast, in facing good fortune, happy circumstances, and comfort, the question of "why" is slower to come. I suppose we simply enjoy the moment more and are less challenged by the drive to understand why things go our way.

I have always been struck by the reflection of the great tennis player Arthur Ashe—Ashe, an African-American who broke through the "color line" in professional tennis in the 1960s and 70s. He is the only black man to win the singles title at Wimbledon (the apex of tennis), the U.S. Open, and the Australian Open. Beyond tennis, he was active in the civil rights movement both in the US and globally. He is now enshrined in memory in his home city of Richmond, Virginia, on Monument Avenue—that street filled with monuments to Confederate generals like Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson. That avenue now sports Arthur Ashe, the African-American tennis player!

What you may not know about Ashe is that he died of AIDS—early on and before effective treatments. He developed AIDS because he went to the hospital for heart by-pass surgery and received an HIV-contaminated unit of blood (the blood supplies were not being tested for HIV yet). He died from complications of that disease—the disease he caught in a place of health, the hospital. If another unit of blood had been used, in all likelihood, he would not have had been infected.

Following his terminal diagnosis, Ashe was asked, "Don't you ask, 'Why me?'" In other words, why did this happen to him? His response was this: I did not ask "Why me?" when I won at Wimbledon. I will not ask "Why me?" now.

One of the greatest human endeavors (perhaps our greatest?) is this hunger and thirst for understanding and knowledge...and Ashe was willing to live with the mystery, with the not-knowing.

When Jesus says, "I am the light of the world," he offers us an understanding and knowledge—enlightenment! And we all can learn from Jesus' teaching. None of us graduates from that school of learning his way—love of neighbor, the setting aside of anxiety and worry, the seeking of kingdom justice, of being satisfied with daily bread, and so much more. We all can benefit from his words—and it is a life-time learning project.

But we also benefit from Jesus' life that leads to a cross. God did not spare Jesus from the way that we all face—the way of pain, betrayal, cruelty, and death. If anyone could protest that they did NOT do anything worthy of their fate, it would be Jesus! And yet Jesus does not dwell on the "why me."

Our quest for enlightenment is ongoing as we follow Jesus. Our mode of being is that of “faith seeking understanding,” and not the reverse—understanding that seeks faith! The order here is crucial—we begin with faith to move to understanding and not the reverse. We see through borrowed light.

Light is welcome...but be careful in what you welcome. Light is welcome...except when you do not want to be seen! For light brings judgment. For example, we have “sunshine laws” in the state of Tennessee. Their purpose is to keep government actions and procedures out in the open. Our elected officials cannot hold secret meetings. Why? Because we behave better in the light! We have “sunshine laws” because we have not done well in the darkness.

Welcome light brings more than benefit...it brings judgment. Enlightenment addresses our longing...but judgment comes as well.

Consider the enlightenment for an Air Force pilot in one of those episodes of the TV series M.A.S.H. The backdrop, of course, is the Korean War and this storyline follows an American bomber pilot, whose B-52 bomber had malfunctioned and he had to parachute out, breaking his leg in the process. He ends up at the mobile Army hospital and gets to know the medical staff, particularly Dr. Hawkeye Pierce.

The pilot had been stationed in Japan. He would report for duty in the morning; fly his mission at high-altitudes; drop the plane’s bombs; and return to his family at night in Japan—his wife and children were with him on the Air Force base. He regaled the hospital staff with how beautiful it was to be 9 miles above the earth—the beauty of the skies.

As he is recuperating in the hospital, he begins to see Korean children who have been maimed and shattered by the war. He is aghast at their suffering. He wants to know whose bombs injured these children. These children are the same age as his daughters! He wants the hospital staff to assure him that American bombs did not do this.

Dr. Hawkeye Pierce says to him, “What difference does it make whose bombs they were? These children are still orphaned and maimed for life.” Then the pilot accuses Dr. Pierce of purposely parading those children before him. And Hawkeye Pierce readily admits it and continues: “You seem like a stand-up guy, but you think this war is just a day-job that sends you through glories of the sky and keeps you safe with wife and daughters at night...but now you know what war is.”²

Enlightenment...it brings judgment.

Jesus said, “I am light of the world.” The clearest enlightenment for us all will be found in him. If we seek enlightenment, without judgment, then we will be like that naïve pilot. If we face judgment without enlightenment, we will be devastated by the nonsense of it all.

Come to him who is “light of life”...for the life that welcomes enlightenment again and again. And life that accepts...even learns...from the judgment. I am the light of the world, says Jesus.

² M.A.S.H., Season 5, Episode 8 “Dear Sigmund”