

January 22, 2022
Through the Water: A World of Light”
Matthew 4:12-23
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Have you ever wondered why space is so dark? Why the sun doesn't light up space?

Rev. Mia Levatan shares that she learned the answer from Astrophysicist Neil Degrasse Tyson. It turns out that the answer is fairly simple: light needs something to reflect off of. Sunlight from our sun and other stars float through space, but without anything to reflect off, there is only darkness. This is how we get moonlight. The moon is just a rock in space. It does not have any light of its own. But because it reflects the sun's light, the moon offers us a bit more light to guide us in the night.

This raises the thought- If this is why space is so dark, how can we reflect more of the son's light to push back the darkness of the world?

Over the last several weeks, we have been exploring the series: Through the Water. We began with Jesus' baptism. Today, we consider how coming through the waters of baptism, Jesus brings a world of light.

When John the Baptist spoke prior to Jesus' baptism, he knew that his job was to point to Jesus, the one who would "baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Mt 3:11). Put another way, he might have been saying that his job was to be like the moon and to reflect the light. To point to the one true light.

As those who follow Jesus, we are called, in some ways to be like the moon and to reflect the light of Christ. We are not the source of the light, but hopefully, we point to the light of Christ with our words and actions.

However, there is one glaring difference between moonlight and Christians. Christians don't merely reflect light, they *are* the light through the power of the Holy Spirit. When the Spirit is at work within us, we become a dwelling place for God's own Spirit. (Rev. Mia Levetan, Adapted & Expanded by Stuart Strachan Jr. [https://thepastorsworkshop.com/sermon-illustrations-2/sermon-illustrations-darkness/The promise of light...](https://thepastorsworkshop.com/sermon-illustrations-2/sermon-illustrations-darkness/The%20promise%20of%20light...)) So, we are called to both reflect light and to allow the light of Christ to shine through us so that the world might be bathed in light—rather than stuck in the emptiness of deep darkness.

This is such an important reminder and call to us, especially this time a year! January's got to be the most depressing month of the year. Christmas is in the past — the hype, the beauty, the singing. What lies ahead is uncertainty, the continuation of short days and long nights, the burden of new goals and resolutions. The deflation that comes from having already given up on them. Who says, "Hey, January is my favorite month of the year!"? Right. No one says that.

But, January can be a powerful reminder that just like the world goes through cycles of gray dark damp days followed by bright sunny ones, so do our lives. So that when we are in one of those dark times, we can remember that there is still light and brighter times are coming.

And hey, at least we don't live in a village above the Arctic Circle where we might experience polar nights. There, for several months on end, people eat, work, sleep, and play in darkness that seems to stretch on forever. They live for months with very small glimpses of light. I think that anyone would experience a bit of "light-lag" to visit there, a feeling of disorientation, sadness, fatigue. A craving to see the light.

Any of us who have been in the dark—which I dare say is all of us—know what it's like to crave the light, to yearn to see it, to strain to catch just a glimpse.

Like those from Isaiah's time and Jesus' time, we are a people who have sat in a land of darkness, who walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Sometimes, that darkness can be so real, so close that it feels like we can hardly breathe—it feels like a polar night- a disorienting, depressing darkness that seems to never end. Some here today are sitting in a kind of personal darkness brought on by illness, or grief, or addiction, or shame. Some are walking through a darkness of brokenness- a broken heart, broken relationship, broken expectations. Some feel like they have failed, like they have let down themselves, their family, their God. Some are experiencing the darkness of racism and injustice, the shadows of economic uncertainty. We all experience the gloom when we turn on the news of war in Ukraine, of those who suffer through disasters, of infighting and violence in our world. It is enough to leave us wondering, where is the light? Leave us straining to catch just a glimpse...

If you are feeling this way, let me say that you are not alone. And, feeling or sensing the darkness does not mean that you have failed—it means that you are human.

I think everyone walks through a time or times in their lives when darkness is pressing in and we feel so distant from the light of love of Christ. If this is you today, hang on. You are not alone. Don't be afraid to talk with someone and share how you are feeling—because sometimes the light comes in knowing that we aren't alone as we sit in the darkness straining for something to hope for, someone to place our hope in.

Even Mother Theresa knew what it was like to struggle with, what some call, the long dark night of the soul. Most of us know Mother Theresa for her stalwart ministry to the poorest of the poor in the slums of Calcutta. But as with each of us, there is a public side of our lives and a private side. Mother Theresa struggled for long periods of her life where she dealt with an acute spiritual darkness and depression. This personal letter to a friend shows just how much she suffered:

Darkness is such that I really do not see—neither with my mind nor with my reason.—The place of God in my soul is blank.—There is no God in me.—When the pain of longing is so great—I just long & long for God—and then it is that I feel—He does not want me—He is not there.—Heaven—souls—why these are just words—which mean nothing to me.—My very life seems so contradictory. I help souls—to go where?—Why all this? Where is the soul in my very being? God does not want me.—Sometimes—I just hear my own heart cry out—“My God” and nothing else comes.—

The torture and pain I can't explain.” From my childhood I have had a most tender love for Jesus...but this too has gone.—I feel nothing before Jesus...You see, Father, the contradiction in my life. I long for God—I want to love Him—to love Him much...and yet there is but pain—longing and love. (Mother Teresa, *Come Be My Light*, ed. Brian Kolodiejchuk, Image Books.)

You see, we all, even those you'd never guess, we all strain at times to see the light; we struggle to catch just a glimpse. And sometimes, it is really only in the darkness that we can truly appreciate the light.

Robert Louis Stevenson, author of *Treasure Island* and other classics, grew up in Edinburgh, Scotland in the 19th century. At the end of each day, as darkness spread over the city, Robert would watch with fascination as the lamplighters came down the street, lighting the gas street lamps.

One evening, seeing their son with his face pressed against the window, Robert's parents asked him what he was looking at. Robert replied excitedly, “Look at that man! He's punching holes in the darkness!” (<https://www.encouragingwordstoday.com/punching-holes-in-the-darkness>)

When we are in the middle of dark times, yearning to see the light, we often find that there are lamplighters who come to punch holes in the darkness and to bring light into our lives.

Jesus was probably the lamplighter extraordinaire. Jesus came to punch holes in the darkness. He came to bring joy and hope, to light the way to a brand new day for all those who walk in darkness. He came to shine light that we might reflect into the world and bring hope and peace even in the midst of the darkness, and He calls us to carry that light into the world.

In our scripture reading today, Jesus has just come from being tempted in the desert- traveling through his own valley of the shadow- and we hear the words of the prophet Isaiah being fulfilled as the “light has dawned”. Jesus goes to a region that was filled with Gentiles, and He begins to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” If this refrain sounds familiar, you might be remembering that these are nearly the exact words that John the Baptist called out to those before Jesus was baptized. Repent- which means turn around. Go a new direction.

Yet, as I looked at the Scripture today, there's one big difference in the messages of John and Jesus- John calls hearers to repentance, to making a change, to moving out of the darkness, but he doesn't tell

them how to make that change. He tells them that they need to do something different, but he isn't exactly super helpful in showing them what that was.

Jesus' message, however, is followed up with a direction, something that can lead us from darkness into the light when He followed up His call to repentance with, "Follow me."

Have you ever known you were lost, wanted to go a different direction but had no idea where to go?

This week, I had to go to downtown Columbus for a meeting. Now, I hate downtown. I grew up in a suburb of Columbus and have lived there my whole life. I even went to Ohio State, but I avoid downtown whenever I can. I have yet to figure out all of the one way streets and the cars and pedestrians just seem to jump out of nowhere. And, let's be honest, GPS is only as good as the user. I had a good idea where I was going. I had a parking garage all picked out, and then I got downtown and the garage was full. I had no choice but to keep going, but then, I was going in the wrong direction. My meeting was behind me. My GPS started to yell at me, telling me to turn around. It was no help in finding a safe place for me to land. I found myself driving up and down streets, looking for a place to park, all the while my GPS was yelling at me. Finally, I found a place to park, I was 15 minutes late, blocks in the wrong direction from where I wanted to go, and the person I was meeting called me and asked where I was. I said, I have no idea....

I think that's sometimes where we are in our lives. We've been sitting in the darkness, or walking through the valleys, and as we strain to see the light, we know that we need to go a different direction, we want to go in a new direction, but we have no idea what to do or where to go, how to get ourselves going in the direction that leads to life and hope.

To those, Jesus says, "Follow me." He comes to Simon Peter and Andrew, to James and John—right where they were, and He calls them, "Follow me." They don't appear to be wandering. After all, they were at work, but something inside of them must have been craving the light of life in Christ for they "immediately" left what they were doing and they followed Jesus.

A few things about this encounter are unusual in Jesus' day. First of all, great teachers didn't seek out followers, the followers came to the teacher. Yet, Jesus sought out Peter, Andrew, James and John. He comes to them, they don't come to Jesus. He sees them; they do not see Him. He talks to them; they do not speak. And, when He does speak, it is both a command and a promise.

Follow me and I will make you fishers of men. Now, this is a strange phrase to us, but apparently the fishing analogy was common in pagan and Jewish tradition and often referred to God's work in calling people to a new life, to participate in God's saving work. Jesus was inviting Simon and Andrew to join Him in God's redeeming work of bringing light into the darkness.

Another strange thing was how quickly they responded... Leaving their family to follow someone would have been shocking to 1st century hearers. These men were not told of any miracles that Jesus had performed, no record of his teaching, no idea given where they were going. So, this whole encounter was counter-cultural. There's no reason that these guys should have followed Jesus, yet, something in them led them to leave behind their pasts, to move in a new direction and to follow Christ. I can only imagine that they were straining to see the light, hoping for a break in the darkness, wanting to move into a new direction, and maybe were just waiting for someone to light the way to new life.

Jesus didn't just want to call them to a new life, He wanted to show them how to *live* that life. He wanted to walk with them along the way. To eat with them. To struggle with them. To help them to grow closer to

God, to know God's presence, and to share in the redeeming work of God with them. He came to carry the light to them and to help them to then share that light with the world.

The scripture goes on to tell us that when they followed Him, they went throughout Galilee, into the synagogues and villages where Jesus taught, proclaimed the good news, and brought healing. Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James, and John to follow Him so that they might see more and more of the light and carry it within them. That they might do more than just listen to His words, but they might watch Him, and learn from Him.

We often learn so much more from watching someone, than simply by listening to their words. It's the reason that a Fish and Game Warden went fishing one day. No one in this town could catch any fish in this one lake except this one Pastor. The Game Warden, thinking the Pastor's prayer life must have been exceptional, asked him how he did it.

The Pastor told the game warden that he would take him fishing the next day. Once they got to the middle of the lake the Pastor opened what looked like a bait bucket, took out a stick of dynamite, lit it, and threw it in the water.

The Warden threw himself into the bottom of the boat. After the explosion, fish started floating to the top of the water and the man took out a net and started picking up the fish.

The game warden, picking himself up out of the bottom of the boat, said Pastor, you should be ashamed! That is illegal. As he was talking, the Pastor took out another stick of dynamite and lit it. The he tossed it to the game warden and said "are you going to fish or talk." (<https://sermoncentral.com/sermons/8220-come-follow-me-and-i-will-make-you-fishers-of-men-8221-leslie-tarlton-sermon-on-fishers-of-men-182254>)

Not exactly the way that Jesus did it.

But, Jesus did light a fuse that He passes on to His followers/His disciples. He wants to show the way that leads to light and life so that the light of His love shines inside of us and begins to radiate through us.

And, when we follow Jesus, when we listen to His Word and respond to the nudges in our hearts, the light grows, and we can reflect that light onto others who may need someone to walk beside them through the darkness, someone who will stand with them and say, "I am here. I know the way, follow me, and we will follow Christ together."—because, if you notice, Jesus didn't call the disciples one at a time in our scripture today, but they came in pairs, together, one with another.

Several years ago, Elizabeth Gilbert shared the secret of how she finds light on her darkest days. She wrote, "I was stuck on a crosstown bus in New York City during rush hour. Traffic was barely moving. The bus was filled with cold, tired people who were deeply irritated — with one another; with the rainy, sleety weather; with the world itself. Two men barked at each other about a shove that might or might not have been intentional. A pregnant woman got on, and nobody offered her a seat. Rage was in the air; no mercy would be found here.

But as the bus approached Seventh Avenue, the driver got on the intercom. "Folks," he said, "I know you've had a rough day and you're frustrated. I can't do anything about the weather or traffic, but here's what I can do. As each one of you gets off the bus, I will reach out my hand to you. As you walk by, drop your troubles into the palm of my hand, okay? Don't take your problems home to your families tonight — just leave 'em with me. My route goes right by the Hudson River, and when I drive by there later, I'll open the window and throw your troubles in the water. Sound good?"

It was as if a spell had lifted. Everyone burst out laughing. Faces gleamed with surprised delight. People who'd been pretending for the past hour not to notice each other's existence were suddenly grinning at each other like, is this guy serious?

Oh, he was serious.

At the next stop — just as promised — the driver reached out his hand, palm up, and waited. One by one, all the exiting commuters placed their hands just above his and mimed the gesture of dropping something into his palm. Some people laughed as they did this, some teared up — but everyone did it. ...

Gilbert writes, "We live in a hard world, my friends. Sometimes it's extra difficult to be a human being. Sometimes you have a bad day. Sometimes you have a bad day that lasts for several years. ... There are times when everything seems cloaked in darkness. You long for the light but don't know where to find it.

But what if you are the light? What if you're the very agent of illumination that a dark situation begs for?

That's what this bus driver taught me — that anyone can be the light, at any moment. ...

No matter who you are, or where you are, or how mundane or tough your situation may seem, I believe you can illuminate your world. In fact, I believe this is the only way the world will ever be illuminated — one bright act of grace at a time, all the way to the river. (Elizabeth Gilbert, "The Kind Gesture that Helps Elizabeth Gilbert Find the Light On Her Worst Days," O Magazine, May 2016.)

What if you are the light? What if you are the very agent of illumination that a situation calls for? No matter who you are, or how tough your situation, you can bring light into the world. In fact, you can be more than a rock that reflects the light. You can shine the light by the power of the Holy Spirit so that there might be healing, hope, and light in the world. You, yes you, are the one being called, do you hear Jesus's calling, "follow Me, and I will show you the way to bring life and light into the world. Come a new way, and follow Me." Let's go together. Leaving behind the past, and moving forward to be bearers of the light for one another- one bright act of grace at a time. Amen.