

University Presbyterian Church
San Antonio, Texas
Elizabeth McGregor Simmons, Pastor
“I Am the Light of the World”
Leviticus 23: 33-36, 39-43
John 8: 12-20
February 10, 2008
First Sunday in Lent

The Old Testament lesson from Leviticus contains the instructions on how the Feast of Tabernacles is to be celebrated by the Israelite community as they make their way across the desert sands from Egypt to the Promised Land.

The Feast of Tabernacles, also called the Feast of Booths, also called Sukkoth, remains one of the three major pilgrim festivals in Judaism. Several years ago, the confirmation class’s customary pilgrimage to Temple Beth-El happened to fall during Sukkoth. Happily, we were graciously invited to experience the two major symbols of the holiday. The first was the sukkah, the booth, that had been erected on the Temple grounds in remembrance of the rapidly built and collapsible shelters required in the desert wandering. After the service, the whole congregation, the confirmation class among them, proceeded outdoors and stood under and around the sukkah. Then Rabbi Block invited one of our class members (Tal McIver, if my memory serves me correctly) to hold the second major symbol of the Feast of Tabernacles. It looked something like this: four objects from nature (ethrog – citron, lulav – palm branch, hadassah – myrtle leaves, aravah – willow). Rabbi Block showed Tal how to wave it back and forth while he recited the appropriate blessings. It was very cool! (1)

Still and all, it wasn’t quite as cool as I have read that the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles was back in the first century when Jesus walked the streets of Jerusalem. The way that I’ve read it described, it reminds me of downtown San Antonio on the night of the Fiesta Flambeau parade: tons of people in a holiday mood thronging the streets and light everywhere.

The holiday began on the first night with the ritual lighting of four golden lampstands in the Temple’s Court of the Women. These candlesticks were huge, apparently; in order to reach the top where there was a golden bowl with a wick floating in it, one had to climb a ladder. The wicks, by the way, were made out of the pants of the priests! (Do you suppose it was what the ancients did with their outgrown apparel instead of taking it to Goodwill or holding a garage sale?) Those lampstands put out a lot of kilowatts—one sources writes “there was not a courtyard in Jerusalem that did not reflect the light of the Beth ha-She’ubah.” And the celebrants at the Tabernacles danced before the lampstands with burning torches, adding more light to their joyous celebration. (2)

The Fourth Evangelist writes in John 7:2 that it was during this light-filled celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles that Jesus spoke the words that are today’s gospel lesson.

.....

Fred Craddock writes in his commentary on the Gospel of John that there are perhaps no passages more seductive for preachers than the “I am’s” of the Fourth Gospel. The expressions, “I am the bread of life,” “I am the good shepherd,” “I am the light of the world,” sound so unambiguously good and positive and right. (3)

On the contrary, however, statements like these would have produced a painful clanging in first-century Jewish eardrums. If you were here for the Ash Wednesday service, you will recall that “I AM” isn’t merely “I am,” an innocuous and not very descriptive subject and verb. It is the very name of God based on the Hebrew verb “to be,” the way that God introduced God’s very own personal self to Moses back in Exodus 3 while simultaneously knocking Moses’ sandals off in front of a burning bush. This was a very big deal to Jews, so big a deal that they never said God’s name out loud, back then and even to his day. An itinerant rabbi casually, to their ears, tossing out an “I AM” here and an “I AM” there would have gotten them a little itchy. Or rather, it got them more than a little itchy. Jesus saying of himself, “I am the light of the world” wasn’t just disrespectful; it was Jesus not only saying God’s name out loud but saying that he and God were one and the same and that wasn’t merely disrespectful--it was off-the-chart blasphemy.

Let me say at this point, somewhat parenthetically, that the Gospel of John is a contentious gospel. It reflects not merely the events of Jesus’ life, his ministry, his death, his resurrection. It also reflects very much what was going on in the gospel writer’s early Christian community. By the time that this gospel was written, a decade or two or three after the Temple had been destroyed in 70 C.E., the Jews of the gospel writer’s community had either stomped out of or, more likely, been kicked out of the synagogue because of their faith in Jesus. The Fourth Evangelist and those for whom he wrote, Jews who were now increasingly identifying themselves as Christians, understood themselves to be a persecuted religious minority, expelled from the synagogue, their religious home. (4)

This is something that twenty-first century readers need to keep in mind as we consider the “I am” sayings in the Gospel of John during this Lenten season and as we read and reflect upon the Gospel of John at any time and come across the Fourth Evangelist’s mention of “the Jews,” “the Jews,” “the Jews,” scowlingly sprinkled like arsenic through the gospel. We need to keep in mind that there was a definite us-against-them mentality, an anti-Semitic tenor even, which was present in the gospel writer’s mention of Jesus saying, in the midst of the light-filled Jerusalem of the Feast of Tabernacles, “I am the light of the world.” The writer is setting up a contrast: the light from the Temple may be reflected in every courtyard of the city, but it pales in comparisons to Jesus who is the light of the whole world. In setting up this contrast, the gospel writer isn’t a journalist striving for objectivity in reporting an interesting physical detail associated with the event of Jesus’ announcement; he is a pastor supporting his congregation as they move away from a primarily Jewish identity to a primarily Christian identity.

When twenty-first century Christians such as ourselves read Jesus words’ “I am the light of the world,” we have to remember the first-century context in which they first appeared in written form, and, remembering this, we, I believe, must reject the us-vs.-them contrast that the gospel writer is setting up, that is, the contrast between Jews and Christians.

At the same time, what Jesus’ words call us to do is to ponder where Jesus might be standing in our world, looking deeply into our souls, and saying with life-altering intensity and a love that flows from a deeply pastoral heart, “I am the light of the world.”

Where do you suppose Jesus might be standing in today’s culture?

Is he standing in the middle of the alluring light-filled space of a busy shopping mall or in a luxury car showroom, saying “*I am* the light of the world”?

Is he standing amid the bustle of the New York Stock Exchange or at the head of the table in the oil company’s corporate boardroom, saying “*I am* the light of the world”?

Is he standing on the 50-yard line at the Super Bowl game, saying “*I am the light of the world*”?

Is he standing in a lecture hall of an Ivy League university or in a laboratory of a major research hospital or pharmaceutical firm, saying “*I am the light of the world*”?

Is he standing on the stage of a presidential debate or at the podium in the U.S. Senate, saying “*I am the light of the world*”?

Is he standing at the pulpit of a brightly lit, packed-to-the-gills megachurch, saying “*I am the light of the world*”?

When we think of Jesus’ standing in these places, then Jesus’ words cast a judging light on all the places that our culture trumpets as the places where happiness, where fulfillment, where salvation can be found for us. And we also come to realize that Christ’s gracious light not only judges the so-called light of so much of our culture revealing it as false, but it also opens our eyes and our hearts and our very being to the true power of Christ’s light to heal and to transform, to see Christ standing amid the many darknesses that still hold such power in our lives and in the world...

To see him standing in the hospice unit as a loved one draws her last labored breaths, saying “*I am the light of the world*”;

To see him standing in a refugee camp in Chad, saying “*I am the light of the world*”;

To see him standing with the families of those who have died this week in a sugar refinery explosion in Savannah or in tornados in Tennessee or in a city council meeting in Kirkwood, Missouri, saying “*I am the light of the world*”;

To see him standing in every war-torn, violence-ridden, heart-wrenching, seemingly hopeless situation we can imagine, saying “*I am the light of the world*”.

Jesus says...to us...I am the light of the world. His light is given to us as a gift, as grace, pure grace, to drive out the darkness. He places his light within us in order that we might judge between that which is true and that which is false, in order that our lives might emanate true light which pierces the darkness in transforming ways.

1. See Howard R. Greenstein, *Judaism: An Eternal Covenant* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 51-52.
2. See Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 344, and Gail R. O’Day, “Gospel of John,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 632.
3. Fred B. Craddock, *John* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 63.
4. O’Day, 505.