

Read John 8:12 aloud.

I. introduction

We had such fun at Vacation Bible School this week! The theme was “Cave Quest”, and everything we did revolved around that idea – crafts, games, science projects, songs, memory verses, Bible story time. Each day had a different critter who explained the thought for the day. Whenever any of the leaders said the phrase for the day, the kids yelled out in response: “FOLLOW HIM!”

The five phrases were:

- Jesus gives us hope
- Jesus gives us courage
- Jesus gives us love
- Jesus gives us His power
- Jesus gives us direction - FOLLOW HIM!

One of the memory aids that each child received was a tiny flashlight. It didn’t seem to give off much light at all in the bright hallway upstairs. But when the kids went into the Imagination Station the room was very dark. Those little lights shone brightly inside the caves that the teachers had built, and helped the children to find bats, salamanders, owls, glow worms, and moths in the caves.

As I listened to the songs and the Bible stories during VBS, and heard the kids yelling “FOLLOW HIM!” I kept thinking of the Bible verse in the Gospel of John when **Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”**

II. Teaching

Jesus made this bold statement in the context of the celebration in Jerusalem of the Feast of Booths, also known as the Feast of Tabernacles. The Feast of Booths lasted a week, so it was the longest festival of the Biblical calendar year. It was celebrated during the time of the autumn harvest, after they had gathered in the crops of the land.

During their first year of freedom, when they camped at the foot of Mount Sinai, God instructed the Israelites to observe this festival annually by living for seven days in temporary booths made of palm fronds, leafy branches and poplar saplings. This festival was to be a reminder to their descendants that God had their ancestors live in booths when God brought them out of slavery in Egypt. (Leviticus 23). For forty years God provided food for them and when there were no streams or wells, God brought forth water from a rock.

God had also given Moses and the Israelites direction and guidance while they were traveling through the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land. God led them with a pillar of cloud by day and with a pillar of fire at night. When the cloud or fire moved, the people followed. When the cloud stopped, they stopped and built new booths for shelter.

It was during the celebration of the Feast of Booths that Jesus went to Jerusalem. As was his custom, he went to the Temple daily to teach the people. There he also got into arguments with the priests, Pharisees and other religious authorities. They hated Jesus and wanted to kill him, but many people were intrigued with what Jesus had to say and wanted to hear more.

As part of the ritual during the Feast of Booths, the priests performed a ceremonial drawing of water from the Pool of Siloam which they then poured over the stone altar in the temple where the sacrifices were made. The water reminded the worshippers of God’s provision of water from out of a rock during the Exodus in the desert. (Numbers 20:2-13)

The second ceremony during the Feast of Booths included a ritual lighting of oil lamps commemorating that “God went ahead of them by day in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light.” (Ex 13:21)

In his explanation of the ceremonies of the Feast of Booths, James Montgomery Boice pointed out that the cloud and the pillar of fire were constant reminders that God was **always present** with his people as they traveled through the wilderness. The cloud **protected** the people from the fierce heat and burning rays of the desert sun. God used both the cloud and the pillar of fire to **guide** the people through the desert to Canaan.

Boice concluded that when Jesus said *“I am the Light of the World. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life,”* he may have been drawing a parallel between the pillar of fire during the Exodus and his own mission. The pillar of fire represented God’s presence with his people; Jesus is literally ‘God with us’. The cloud protected the people from the harmful rays of the sun; through his atoning death on the cross Jesus protected his people from the harmful effects of sin. Even today, through the Holy Spirit, Jesus guides the lives of all those who believe and follow him.¹ To say that He is the Light means that Jesus is the source of all blessings and well-being. It is He who brings salvation.

The Bible often uses the metaphors of light and darkness when speaking of God the Creator. God and His glory are often described using light: “God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all.” (1 John 1:5) The first chapter of the Gospel of John gives a philosophical and theological explanation of how the Son of God, also called the Word, is incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth as the light who shines in the darkness. (John 1:1-5) Jesus, by saying that he is the Light of the World, was identifying himself with the one and only God.

‘Darkness’ is often a metaphor for spiritual blindness, ignorance, sin, unbelief or for rejecting Christ. Without the Light of Jesus Christ to illumine the way out of the darkness of sin and death, people will perish. However, those who believe, live in the Light of the Gospel and by the spirit of Christ. They will always follow Him.

Psalm 18:28 verifies *“You, O Lord, keep my lamp burning; My God turns my darkness into light.”*

Psalm 27:1 proclaims, *“The Lord is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear?”*

Psalm 119:108 affirms *“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.”*

And in Deuteronomy 31:8 God promises *“Do not be afraid for I will go before you and be with you. I will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.”*

Just like the leading of the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, Jesus is saying that whoever follows him will have the light of life and will never walk in darkness. Those who believe and follow him can put their trust in all the truth and promises in the Bible. Just like we learned in Vacation Bible School: Jesus gives us direction: FOLLOW HIM!

III. Testimony

I am certain without a doubt that you can trust that Jesus is the Light of the world, and more than that, Jesus is the Light of YOUR life, if you believe and follow him.

I know because Jesus did that for me. When I first became a Christian, I memorized Psalm 32:8: ***“I will instruct you, says the Lord, and guide you along the best pathway for your life. I will advise you and watch your progress.”***

And he has kept that promise all my life.

When I was a freshman in college, I asked all sorts of questions. I could see the difference between the kids I was hanging out with, and the Christian kids that my roommate was friends with. By the end of freshman year, I gave my life to Christ. Over the years Jesus has guided me through many challenges, changes, and moves to new cities.

¹<http://Onecornerstone.org/blog/2013/05/the-light-of-the-world-05-09-13/>

When I was in my 40's I had a part-time job about ten hours per week working for North Shore Christian Network magazine in Massachusetts. But I needed to earn more money to support my family. One day I was sitting on my sofa flipping through the yellow pages and praying that God would help me find an additional job. The phone rang while I was praying, and a minister said that a friend of mine had recommended that he call and invite me to consider the position of Director of Women's Ministries at his church. I was hired for the position, and it perfectly balanced with my job at Network News. I served there about three years.

During that time, I had a strong sense that I was being called to ordination. I already had my degree, but had been home raising children. I tried and tried to find a call in Massachusetts, but there are only about 12 Presbyterian churches in all of New England. Eventually I realized that I had to surrender to God's Will. I said, "all right God. If it is your will, I guess I am willing to move." Within a few weeks I was called to be the Associate Pastor of a Presbyterian Church outside Philadelphia. I served there for six years.

Through an amazing combination of circumstances that could only have been coordinated by our sovereign God, I was called in 2009 to be the Associate Pastor at First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh. And now I am here with you! God's providence and timing takes my breath away!

I proclaim to you that Jesus really does give direction to your life if you believe in Him, and trust in Him, and follow him. Jesus is the Light of the World and he wants to be the Light of *your* life too. He will illuminate all those hidden corners of your life that need to be cleaned out. He will shine warmly on you as you grow to be more like him. His light will wash away the sin from your life and give you a fresh new start.

Jesus does not promise that life will always be easy. He does not remove all our problems or sorrows. I have still had pain, sorrow, grief, hardship and struggles. I still make mistakes and I still sin, much to my sorrow. But throughout my life Jesus has been there, to strengthen me, guide me, forgive me, heal me. He offered to give me direction, and I followed Him. Life with him is a true Joy.

IV. Application

One of the skits at VBS this week included the song that the children sang about "This little Light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine!" Lois and Marsha were terrific at acting out the song. One of the verses of the song goes "Hide it under a bushel? No! I'm gonna let it shine!" The ladies began their skit with Marsha hiding with a huge bushel basket over her head. She said she wanted to hide her light. Lois helped her get the basket off her head and encouraged Marsha to share her light with others. Then the group of children talked about the ways that they could share the light of Jesus with people they knew. All of us need to share that light of Jesus with others. **BUT HOW?**

Josh McDowell told a story about a friend of his whose job was to go out and hire corporate executives for other firms. His strategy was to get the person all relaxed chatting about baseball or family or whatever. Then suddenly he would ask, "What's your purpose in life?" He said it was amazing how top executives fell apart at that question. One day he was interviewing someone, and got around to asking "What's your purpose in life, Bob?" The man replied immediately, "**To go to heaven and take as many people with me as I can.**" The head hunter said that was the first time in his career when *he* was speechless! Bob's priority in life was to share the light of Jesus Christ with everyone he met.ⁱ

Another author shared an experience she had at 6 a.m. in the locker room at the local swimming pool. A voice on the other side of the lockers caught her attention with its cheerfulness. "Debbie, I really appreciated the book you picked up for me last week. I know the library was out of your way. I haven't been able to put the book down. Solzhenitsyn is a great writer. I'm glad you suggested him to me."

Then the voice cheerfully greeted other swimmers.

The voice was too good to be true. Who can be that thankful that early in the morning? But then as she rounded the corner she was surprised to discover that the cheerful voice came from an employee who cleaned the locker rooms every day! The woman carrying the mops, brooms, dust cloths and buckets flashed a smile and hurried out the door spreading "have a glorious day" as she went.ⁱⁱ

When you live with joy, that is the same as sharing the Light of Jesus. Eventually someone will ask, "What makes you *different*? Why are you so joyful?" That is the clue that you have earned permission to tell them about Jesus, the Light of the World, who changed your life.

My friend Julie put a post on Face book this weekend about someone who had shared the light of Christ with her.

Julie wrote, *“This week marks 20 years that we started our faith-walk as a family– said yes to Jesus before we really understood what we were getting into – and it sure has been the journey of a lifetime! Choosing to walk with Jesus hasn’t been a life free from deep pain, struggles, obstacles, uncertainties, hurts and disappointments, but it has been filled with His strength, hope, grace, blessings, joy, boldness, purpose and love. We are so thankful for **the sweet 80-year-old stranger** who heard we were hurting and courageously knocked on our door one hot July evening 20 years ago to share the hope and love of the Lord and start us on our beautiful journey.”*

Each of you who already know the Light of Jesus Christ, I encourage you to share that light with the people you encounter. What you say or do may seem like a small thing to you, but it could change the life of the person you help.

V. Conclusion

For those of you who have not yet made that decision to follow him, Jesus is here saying to you, “I am the Light of the World. If you will follow me, you will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”

Jesus will instruct you and guide you along the best pathway of your life. He will be for you like a pillar of cloud leading you by day, and a pillar of fire protecting and guiding you thru the darkest night.

What we learned this week in Vacation Bible School is so true!

Kids – show the grown-ups what to say!

- Jesus will give you **hope!** - Follow Him!
- Jesus will give you **courage** – Follow Him!
- Jesus will give you **love** – Follow Him!
- Jesus will give you the **power** of the Holy Spirit – Follow Him!
- Jesus will give you **direction** – Follow Him!

*May Jesus, the Light of the World,
give you hope, courage, love, and direction
through the power of the Holy Spirit
so that you are able to Follow Him Always.
In the Name of the Father and of the Son
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

ⁱ Stories for the Heart, p. 112 “Head Hunter” by Josh McDowell

ⁱⁱ Ibid, p. 91. “Contentment is...” by Ruth Senter