

Jeremiah 31:7-14

⁷ The Lord proclaims: Sing joyfully for the people of Jacob; shout for the leading nation. Raise your voices with praise and call out: “The Lord has saved his people, the remaining few in Israel!”

⁸ I’m going to bring them back from the north; I will gather them from the ends of the earth. Among them will be the blind and the disabled, expectant mothers and those in labor; a great throng will return here. ⁹ With tears of joy they will come; while they pray, I will bring them back. I will lead them by quiet streams and on smooth paths so they don’t stumble. I will be Israel’s father, Ephraim will be my oldest child.

¹⁰ Listen to the Lord’s word, you nations, and announce it to the distant islands: The one who scattered Israel will gather them and keep them safe, as a shepherd his flock. ¹¹ The Lord will rescue the people of Jacob and deliver them from the power of those stronger than they are.

¹² They will come shouting for joy on the hills of Zion, jubilant over the Lord’s gifts: grain, wine, oil, flocks, and herds. Their lives will be like a lush garden; they will grieve no more.

¹³ Then the young women will dance for joy; the young and old men will join in. I will turn their mourning into laughter and their sadness into joy; I will comfort them. ¹⁴ I will lavish the priests with abundance and shower my people with my gifts, declares the Lord.

John 1:1-18

¹ In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. ² The Word was with God in the beginning. ³ Everything came into being through the Word, and without the Word nothing came into being. What came into being ⁴ through the Word was life, and the life was the light for all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn’t extinguish the light.

⁶ A man named John was sent from God. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning the light, so that through him everyone would believe in the light. ⁸ He himself wasn't the light, but his mission was to testify concerning the light.

⁹ The true light that shines on all people was coming into the world. ¹⁰ The light was in the world, and the world came into being through the light, but the world didn't recognize the light.

¹¹ The light came to his own people, and his own people didn't welcome him. ¹² But those who did welcome him, those who believed in his name, he authorized to become God's children,

¹³ born not from blood nor from human desire or passion, but born from God. ¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his home among us. We have seen his glory, glory like that of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

¹⁵ John testified about him, crying out, "This is the one of whom I said, 'He who comes after me is greater than me because he existed before me.'" ¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace; ¹⁷ as the Law was given through Moses, so grace and truth came into being through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God. God the only Son, who is at the Father's side, has made God known.



Today we enter into Epiphany – the season of light. Today in the Kids' Message we remembered the journey of the wise men or magi. It was the star – the light in the sky – that led these men to Jesus, the light of the world, the revelation of divine love made present to us in the flesh. While this season is all about light, we must not forget the role that darkness plays in helping us to notice the light. Darkness or the absence of light helps regulate our sleep, draws us to a place of peace and calm, awakens our imagination as we rest, heightens our awareness. It did some things for those magi too. They only noticed the star's light in the dark of night. And they needed the dark to follow the light.

As we prepare to enter this time and space together, let us pray...

Holy God, your light shines in the darkness. The bright star of your loving presence hovers over us, shines within us, and leads us steadfastly. We pause now to watch and listen, to take our reckoning by your star, that we may continue to follow faithfully, to seek you in this world, and to give you our gifts. Speak your Word, for we are listening. It is with a listening spirit and heart that I ask you, O God, to bless the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts. You are our rock and our redeemer, our Christ and our king. Amen.

If you spend almost any time at all watching TV or on Facebook or really any other social media platform, you can tell that we at the start of a new year. We see lots of ads for gyms and fitness equipment. We see ads for storage solutions too. At the start of a new year, if one listens to the ad experts, many of us are resolved to get organized and to get in better shape. Whether you are affected by it or not, our culture is driving home the message that we need to look good. And that brings me to a little joke...

There was a young boy who said to his father, “Dad, I’m not a good looker.” The father was stunned, worried, even angered that the culture was exerting such pressure on his young child. Trying to find a way to counter society’s emphasis on the importance of physical looks, the father asked his son, “Who says you are not a good looker?” The son replied, “I do,” revealing some frustration himself. Then he added, “Every time I lose something, I can never find it. I’m not a good looker!”

So, I ask, are you a good looker? I suppose that our answer to that question depends on what we are looking for, doesn’t it?

In the story of the wise men, they were good lookers. They saw a new star in the sky, and they looked into this discovery, studying many texts to find the meaning of this new thing in the sky. As they studied various texts, they came across a Hebrew story about the coming of the Messiah. The magi chose to follow this new star, looking up into the dark night sky as they traveled. Once in Israel, they looked up the present king, thinking that they'd find this newborn king in a palace. Undeterred by that stop, they continued looking, finally following the star to a small town called Bethlehem, where their search ended in front of a manger. As long as they followed the star, all went well for the wise men. The same is generally true for us: as long as we follow Jesus, the light, life goes pretty well for us.

There are a few points from the story of the wise men that I want to touch on before delving into today's two readings. In Matthew's gospel, we first learn that God leads. There was a star in the sky created by God. The wise men saw the star that God had created. God continues to provide the light. All that we need to do is see the light that God provides. Second, we must decide to follow the light. God does not light the way and then force us onto the path, dragging us along begrudgingly. God wants followers, not puppets. In many ways, God puts the light out there, seeking to guide our path, our decisions, our actions.

And third, God keeps on leading when we decide to follow. God did not abandon the wise men when they stopped to ask Herod for directions. God was patient and resumed leading when the wise men started following the light again. God will do the same for us. When we lose our focus, when we decide to walk another path, when we fall short, God does not give up. God waits for us to follow again.

Lessons from Matthew 2:

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3) God keeps on leading.

Please turn with me to Jeremiah 31 as we look at this passage within this framework. Our Old Testament passage begins with an invitation to shout joyfully, to praise the Lord. This invitation is centered on God saving Israel. As we continue, we see what this saving will look like for the people of God. First, God says, “*I will gather them from the ends of the earth.*” The people of God have been scattered far and wide. This is step one: God leads. Among those being led are the blind and the disabled and expectant mothers, some even in labor.

As we press on, we see how God leads. God will lead them “*on smooth paths so they don’t stumble.*” God “*will gather them and keep them safe, as a shepherd his flock.*” Against all logic, God will rescue the people from a nation that is stronger and more powerful than Israel. God is offering to lead Israel home, to light their path back to the Promised Land. Israel must choose to follow God’s leading. That is step two. For most of the people in captivity, it was probably easy to decide to go where God wanted to lead them. Return to the place of our fathers, to the place promised long ago? Let’s go!

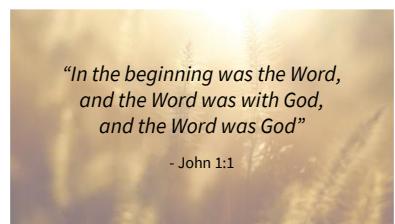
But this is probably not the response for all of the people. I think that is why God, through the prophet, specifically names the blind and disabled and the pregnant. These groups must choose to trust in God. It would be easier to just stay put, to just wait until after the child is born and weaned and grown up a bit. Sometimes we are like this too, asking God to just wait a minute or two. Then we’ll be ready to decide to follow where God is leading. God knows this is true for some in exile, just as God knows it is true for some of us today.

I think that is why God next paints the picture for what it will be like if they decide to follow. Their lives will be like “*lush gardens.*” God will shower the people with abundant gifts.

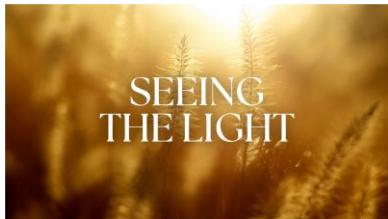
Grain and wine and oil will flow abundantly. Flocks and herds will cover the land. Painting this picture, God encourages the reluctant and hesitant to follow where God wants to lead the people of God. Sometimes God does this in our lives. God puts a dream in our minds, a hope in our hearts, inviting us to just step forward in trust. God casts forth a little light into our darkness, beckoning us to just take that first step of faith. And when we are hesitant or reluctant, God does not give up. God keeps shining the light, inviting us to walk God's path.

On the one hand, these lessons can be so easy to learn and live. It is easy because all we have to do is look up, to look beyond ourselves; beyond our own desires and efforts; and, beyond our own abilities and weaknesses. We just need to look up to the one who guides and directs and teaches and inspires. Just look up, right? It is easy, right? Well, maybe it is really simple, but not always easy. For some of us, we get in our own way. We want to trust our own strength, our own abilities, our own resources. We want to be in control, to be in charge. It is hard for some of us to give these things up, instead choosing to rely on and to trust into the one who can redeem and sustain us, no matter what.

As we continue, I invite you to turn to John 1, where we find what I think is one of the most beautiful passages in all of scripture. In the opening three verses we get Jesus' credentials to lead as the light. Verses 1-3 establish Jesus' role as creator with God. The threefold claim "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*" reveals the origin of Jesus, his relationship with God, and his identity as God.



Verse 4 leans into the incarnation. Here we read that the Word, Jesus, was life and that “*the life was the light for all people.*” Moving on, we read that this light shines into the darkness. The fact that the incarnation of God is first presented as light shining in darkness evokes the creation story in Genesis – the “*in the beginning was the Word*” that opens John’s gospel. The fact that the darkness cannot extinguish the light leans into the eternal nature of God.

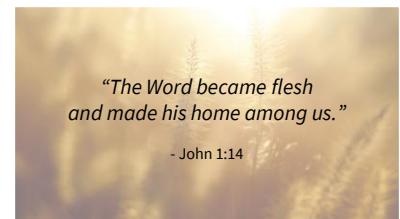


In verse 6 John the Baptist enters the story. But it is not John the Baptist here. It is John the witness, the one who saw the light of God coming into the world and then told others about it. In casting John as a witness to Christ, this fourth gospel suggests that a critical response to Christ is found in our witness. In this sense, Christmas is not over when the trees are put on the burn pile or packed away until next year. Christmas is just getting started for those who confess Jesus as God who came in the flesh. This connects into step 2 – where we are deciding to continue to follow the one who desires to lead and guide all aspects of our life.

The witness that John offers is to be the witness that we offer. Through his testimony, John invited others to believe in the light of the world, in Jesus Christ. It is the light of Christ’s love that lights our path and guides our way. When we look at life in the light of God’s love, that changes how we see the world, how we interact with the world, how we treat and see those that we meet in this world. As the light of that love shines in us, we become lights for others: streetlamps that offer guidance and safety, lighthouses that warn of danger, a new dawn that signals hope and beauty. This idea of being Christ to the world is what the gospel writer leans into as we turn to verses 9-13.

John first proclaims in verse 9 that “*the true light was coming into the world.*” Even though the light came into the world, like the wise men, we must look to see the light. It is a choice. That is why John then reminds us, in verses 10 and 11, that although God in the flesh literally came into the world to be the light for all peoples, the world did not recognize the light. The world did not welcome the light. This continues to be the case today for many people. This is why our witness to Christ is so important. The world needs to see Christ’s light and love in us.

As we press on, into verse 14, we see that God chose to recreate God’s very self in Jesus. In his gospel, John puts it this way: “*The Word became flesh and made his home among us.*” In the incarnation, God chose to be born into the world, coming to us as God’s creating Word, now in the flesh. This primordial Word, which was in the beginning with God, a partner in creation, in relationship with God, and who is God, has now become human. Present with us, Jesus, as Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* puts it: “God moved into the neighborhood.”



The dwelling of God among us is a deeply intimate, personal claim. This claim assumes God’s commitment to be forever with God’s people. In this eternal, covenant commitment, in the Word being made flesh and dwelling among us, God promises to not only go where God’s people go, but God also promises to go out in front, to lead so that we may follow. This is step three – lived out again and again in our lives and in our world. Moving into our neighborhoods and into our hearts, God’s presence is right here, right now, forever with us, inviting us to be a witness to the light that shines in the darkness.

To close, a quick review. Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, came to dwell among us to set for us an example of how to be the light and love of God, made real in the world. God took the lead and invited us to follow. If we accept Jesus as Lord and Savior, if we decide to follow, then we are committing to allow Christ's light and love to guide all that we do and in all that we are. Through this commitment, we are dedicating our lives to reflecting the light and love of Christ in all of our encounters, in all of our interactions, and in all of our relationships. Doing so, we will help others to see the light and to feel the love of Christ.

Lessons from today's scriptures:

- 1) God leads.
- 2) We must decide to follow.
- 3) God keeps on leading.

Seeing the light, recognizing our need for the light to shine in our darkness, that is a step we often repeat. When we let the light shine in our own darkness, shedding light on our sins and failures, in love God invites us to return to the walk of faith, to walking in the light. In this refining process, we become more like the Christ that we seek to follow. In turn, we better see Christ in each person that we meet. It is with this hope and prayer that I encourage us to be the light and love for those living in the darkness of this world. May it be so for you and for me this week. Alleluia and amen.

Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow.* When has rededicating your life to Christ after a time of sin or failure lead to a new growth spurt on your journey of faith?
- 2) *Pray.* Do you know someone who is struggling to see where God might be trying to lead them? How can you pray for their eyes and heart to be opened?
- 3) *Study.* Read Matthew 2:1-12. How might following Jesus lead you to times when you fall to your knees, honoring Christ, giving him your gifts?