

# Bryn Mawr Gives Light

## *Living as Light*

By  
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from the pulpit of  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

October 27, 2024

Isaiah 60: 1-3, 19-22

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

The sun shall no longer be your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night; but the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. Your sun shall no more go down, or your moon withdraw itself; for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning shall be ended.

## Matthew 5:1-16

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. <sup>2</sup>Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: <sup>3</sup>“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup>“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. <sup>5</sup>“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. <sup>6</sup>“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. <sup>7</sup>“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. <sup>8</sup>“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

<sup>9</sup>“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

<sup>10</sup>“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>11</sup>“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. <sup>13</sup>“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. <sup>14</sup>“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. <sup>15</sup>No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. <sup>16</sup>In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

I know good taste would tell me to avoid controversial topics, and the countdown is around the corner, so here it goes: *I cannot wait for daylight savings to end*. Every morning it gets harder and harder for me to wake up. Despite the special alarm clock that has a built-in full spectrum light that slowly starts to glow to trick my brain to think the sun is out... it does not work; my brain will not be fully tricked. I am left with the alarm blaring, and me glaring out at the pitch-black outside. I cannot wait until it is an hour later, and I can rise to the gentle rays of the morning sun. I know that it will only be a temporary reprieve as the days continue to grow shorter, but there is something about the light that I am drawn to.

Over the past few weeks, we have been positively awash in light. It's as though the light grows more intense as the hours grow short. It's as though it saturates the world around us. When you drive down Montgomery Avenue are you ever caught in that moment when the light filters through the deep reds of the maples or seemingly ignites the oranges and yellows. Do you ever get distracted by the beauty? I'm not saying this associate pastor ever gets distracted, but there are probably associate pastors that are just so struck by the light. It's almost unreal. As one preschooler declared looking at the bright yellow leaves— "It's like the tree is filled with sunshine."

There is something about light.

Light is incredible.

Light dances and moves, splitting into a rainbow of colors when forced through a prism or even just a raindrop. It warms the pillow where your cat likes to rest. It explodes in fireworks and celebrations.

Light may look steady, but it's always on the move. Light moves at 186,000 miles per second. It is so consistent that the measurement of the meter is based off it. In a sprint, light would make it around the world 7.6 times in one second. There is no way for us to perceive that movement and yet it keeps moving.

In fact, our eyes can only perceive a small aspect of light-- .0035% of the full spectrum of light. Imagine how big the pie chart would need to be in order to see a sliver that small. .0035% of all light, that's all we can see, and yet that silver allows us to see the beauty of the Sistine chapel, *and* the colors of coral reef, *and* the power of an Ansel Adams photograph.

Even though we can only perceive the slightest fraction of the full spectrum of light, our eyes are drawn to it. Our pupils strain and dilate in searching for even the

smallest pinprick of light. When it is pitch black, the human eye can perceive just .01 lux of light. I have no idea what a lux is, but a candle 12.4 luxes or another way to say it, the candle you hold on Christmas eve is 1200 times more than we need to perceive the presence of light.

There is something innate in us that seeks out the light. Like trees in the forest, like the birds that sing at the promise of morning, we turn towards light.

I don't think it is a mistake that the ancient Hebrew poets sang the song of creation beginning with light breaking forth or that the beloved disciple chose to describe the son as light before he was named Jesus, or that John in Revelation described the seven churches as the seven lampstands—places made to bear the light.

At VBC, it's a crowd favorite and even if we are off key and a little off beat, we are excited to sing: This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.

It's one of first metaphors we teach, as I speak here, in classrooms a candle will be lit. We will sit in the light, and we will remember that the light is with us. If you are so privileged to sit in that space, you will see their faces turn and stare at the light, resting in its glow, and as a teacher, you look at your students and see the light reflected in their eyes.

*We teach about the light because it is a metaphor that can stretch. Stretch to help us understand God, stretch to help us understand our own witness in the world. Stretch to help us narrate our own journey and our longing. Light flows through the story of scripture, through our liturgy, on the lips of poets, and even finds its place in this year's stewardship campaign.*

There is something powerful about light.

Light is not good or bad, safe or dangerous; light is simply light, but it is transformative. When God spoke through the prophet Isaiah calling the people to "Arise! Shine!" It was because the light was with them. Such a light would draw the attention of kings and nations, such a light would mean the sun and moon were no longer necessary. It would no longer be something external but something intrinsic to their own being. They would be light, and the light would be with them. This image is reflected in the book of Revelation when John of Patmos describes God being so present that we will no longer needed lamps or sunlight or anything to see.

*A people transformed by the light—The light transforming the people.*

Now, I could go on and on about light. But I worry sometimes, that even our most powerful metaphors, our most enduring images, can lose something over time.

Though I come back to the sermon on the mount as a starting place, I have to catch the times I start reading it on auto pilot, not paying attention or the words, just skimming through. Even worse, sometimes I read these words with a cynical eye. I wonder what the people heard that day. *If I had come seeking a miracle, hoping that Jesus would heal me or free me, I'm not sure how I would take the words "blessed are." The tax collectors would still be waiting, the roman soldiers still patrolling, and the dust of the road would still be dusty.* Why do we remember those words? Why do they matter? Can they really speak today?

When I am deep in grief, I certainly don't feel blessed and sometimes I do not feel comforted. Those working for peace are called many things and rarely is it the children of God.

Likewise, I have to wonder what the people around Isaiah heard that day. Remember, this was spoken to the people after they had left the hanging gardens and the lights of the big city of Babylon and returned to the decimated ruins of Jerusalem. I wonder if they, like the team that had lost every game in the season, just stared at Isiah mid pep-talk and rolled their eyes. Don't talk to us about light, when we're all sporting a sunburn.

It's the first metaphor we teach, but it's easy for the image to lose its power. We become cynical. We roll our eyes at such a cheesy notion, that the evil of this world can be defeated by simply "shining." A catch phrase that sounds like something to be purchased painted on wood and sold in the clearance section of a nothing more than painted sign you can buy off the clearance shelf.

*What good is light when it is up against so much.* I can imagine if you took a second to list the challenges of this day, they would be legion. All of us are facing something different and the world is facing too many things to count. War rages and threatens, famine lurks and strikes. Hate screams on the street and at family meals. You know the hurts that you are bearing. The weight that stays tight in the muscles around your neck has a name. The things you are trying to silence are so loud as to be deafening.

You can look at the callouses on your hand and wonder if it was worth it and be wary of starting the work again.

But here's the funny thing about light, we don't have a choice.

Despite ourselves, our eyes adjust and search for it. Our eyes adjust when the light is overwhelming. And when there seems to be no light at all, our eyes will search and find just that glowing ember, that barely discernable spark, that .01 lux of light. And no, I don't think it's just our eyes that are searching and I don't think it's just the visible spectrum of light we seek.

*When Isaiah told the people to arise and shine, when Jesus commanded the disciples to do the same, it was never really a choice. In Hebrew the word for light and the word for skin are homonyms—or and or. Teachers and mystics have found meaning in that shared sound. Teaching that our very flesh, our skin, can be light. Light that brings warmth, light that burns injustices, light that shows others the way.*

Jesus doesn't start by telling us to shine, Jesus begins by saying you are the light of the world, you are a city on the hill. You don't get to hide. Even if you put your light under a bushel... let's admit it would be a very bad plan to put a reed basket over an open flame—even before the basket burst into flame, the light would escape. Even then you cannot hide the light. The light is woven into us. The light surrounds us in our very being. We cannot hide it, nor can we hide from it. Even if we only have .01 lux left in us. You are still the light, and we need each and every spark and ember we can find to face the challenges we face. Eyes are straining for it. Hearts and longing for it. We are waiting to see if there is enough light to prove that the night will come to an end.

Maybe your eyes have adjusted and you cannot see all of the light you already give off, the light you already share:

Look around you and see the light already here:

It is the light that positively glows telling the story of the church in these stained-glass windows and the light that shines as people come into our building finding a place of welcome.

Its light shared as the memory of saints are lifted up and shine here in the flowers, that are split apart and made into bouquets that are delivered, light shining.

*It was the light that began as a faithful gift placed in the BMPC foundation years ago. A small gift representing less than 1% of the total amount that still pays out enough interest to buy bibles for our students each year.*

It is light that shines into my living room almost every night as your cars turn around in the parking lot as you leave the church after serving on a committee, or

attending a class, or volunteer with one of our programs and you head home after having already put in a full day of work and service.

*It is the light that shines around a campfire as marshmallows burst into flame and faith is formed during a youth retreat.*

It is light that flashes when the freezers are opened, and casseroles are removed to be delivered to mission partners near and far.

*It is the light that is reflected each time we baptize, and water practically sparkles.*

It is the light of a family gathered in a hospital room surrounded by the prayers of this community.

It is light in the glow of a computer screen as emails go back and forth to get the right resources to a partner half-way around the world.

*It is the light shining up in the Middleton center knowing that someone is receiving help and space to heal.*

It is the light I see during fellowship when old friends reunite, when a connection is made.

*It is the light you share in the commitments written on pledge cards. Individual guides that let the church leadership help us see how far we can go and what we can accomplish together in the coming year.*

Friends, I don't know what you have written down, but I know that what you offer is a gift of light to a world that is searching for this light. If you want to be challenged, it's important to know that the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> graders included the drawing of a check for 10 million dollars on their pledge card. I encourage you to meet or match that number.

Friends, we are awash in light. Awash in light shining from the time, talent, and indeed treasures you choose to share.

Today we pause to give thanks that God has given us light to share.

Today we pause in an otherwise breakneck season to dedicate such abundance back to God.

Maybe you're worried that there might not be enough light and you need to hold on because the days are getting shorter and the nights are awfully long. There are a lot of unknowns, plenty of things can go wrong, plenty of people who will have needs,

maybe part of you is thinking I should keep this for myself. The night is coming, and I don't want to be left in the dark.

So let me share this: In that same Pre- K and Kindergarten classroom, we teach the story of the light by first lighting a tall pillar candle and telling the children that *“once there was a man who did such wonderful things and said such amazing things that people began to follow him and ask “Who are you” and he said, “I am the light of the World.” “*

From there we begin to light tiny votive candles off of the big candle. One for each student and teacher and helper in the room. The light begins to cover the cover the floor.

We say this, *“People who love the light can become one with the light. Look at how the light is growing. It all came from the light here. I wonder how so much light can be given away and the light still be the same. See the light keeps growing and growing, but the first light. It doesn't get any smaller. Neither do any of the others.”*

We tell the children that *“There comes a time when the light is changed so that it is not just in one place anymore. It can be in so many places at once. See how I change the light.”*

As we blow out the candles, we look around the room. We look at the light streaming in, in the bulbs overhead, and in the light in each of the children listening.

When we come to the last light we say, *“The light that was in one place and at one time is now in all places and at all times. It is with all people. It is with me and it is with you.”*

Family of God, the light is with you, and it is with me, it is here in this place and it is out in the world. So go and shine, shine like a city on a hill, like one lumen in deep darkness, go and share the light that has been woven into you and into me and into our common work together.