

Light is fast. I mean, really, really fast. Nothing is faster than light. If you could travel the speed of light, you could fly around the world seven and a half times in a second. By contrast, if you were to fly nonstop around the world in a commercial plane, it would take fifty hours.

Science Fiction author Douglas Adams quipped, “Nothing travels faster than the speed of light, with the possible exception of bad news, which obeys its own special laws.” As Christians, we hope that good news would travel just as fast, if not faster. We have a special name for the good news of Jesus Christ dying and rising again to save the world, we call that the Gospel.

As we close out our sermon series on light, we see that light travels. It travels well, it travels fast. So too, the good news of Jesus Christ travels well and it travels fast. We conclude the sermon series looking at yet another text from Isaiah. Isaiah chapter 9 tells us of the light traveling causing the people to rejoice, even people you wouldn’t expect. **“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.”** BECAUSE JESUS' TRAVELED TO THE NATIONS, WE SHINE HIS LIGHT TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH.

First, I. Jesus shone His light in places you wouldn't expect. Who are the people who walked in darkness? Isaiah tells us, **“but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.”** Isaiah is talking about something unthinkable to the Jews of the time. The people included in the promises of light and salvation would be people who didn’t look like them, talk like them, or act like them: the Gentiles, as in, those who weren’t Jewish.

This is fulfilled in the Gospel promises of Jesus coming to save us. John puts it another way, **“The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”** Light travels, and the light of Christ traveled to this earth to live among us and grace us with His presence.

Where do you think God would dwell? In the palaces of kings? In the fanciest temples and churches? In a beautiful, severe place like the top of Mount Everest? No, light traveled to this world and did ministry in Galilee, a backwater region of Israel: a region where they could recognize you by your accent. Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth was 70 miles north of Jerusalem, the central city. However, Jesus did most of his ministry in this region and our Gospel text shows us the calling of His first followers or disciples, who would also be Galileans.

Light travels, and so Jesus interacted with all kinds of people you wouldn’t expect: foreigners such as a Syrophenician woman, a Samaritan woman, and a Roman centurion. He ministered to the sick, the disabled, and tax collectors and

sinner. Light doesn't discriminate, it simply goes the direction it is pointed and lights everything in its path.

We see in this ministry joy and gladness. Isaiah continues: **“You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.”** In other words, Jesus brings a joy that can only be compared to the joy after being full at a Thanksgiving meal, the gladness of a Christmas tree with presents surrounding it. The joy of Jesus is a sudden reversal of fortunes, like a 33-point comeback in football, or like hearing news of incurable cancer in remission.

Jesus' ministry brought new life, forgiveness of sins, and healing to those around Him: joy at harvest and gladness at the division of spoil. However, the forces of evil thought they had won when they crucified Him and sent Him to His death, but the rod of the oppressor was broken like Gideon defeating Israel's enemies suddenly like at Midian when Jesus burst from the tomb. Light travels, and even death couldn't keep the light extinguished.

And it is this good news that travels to the ends of the Earth. II. Missionaries shone His light all over the world. We hear stories of the disciples traveling to the ends of the earth. Peter, Paul, and their colleagues traveled all throughout the Roman world in the book of Acts, going as far West as Rome. Tradition holds that the twelve apostles went all four directions: a group of Christians in India claims they were visited by the apostle Thomas. Other apostles went as far south as Ethiopia. Some Chinese Christians claim the message of Jesus got as far as China by the 3<sup>rd</sup> century.

What's especially remarkable is the spread of Christianity in the Roman Empire. By the year 350, one historian estimates that over half the Roman population was Christian. Sociologist Rodney Stark writes in *The Rise of Christianity* that in order for Christianity to have grown the way it did in its first 350 years, it had to grow by 4% every year. I know that 4% might not seem like a lot, but that's a net gain. That would be similar to if every year our church membership grew by 6, and then 7, and then so on.

Stark tends to take a secular view and tries not to attribute the miraculous to this, but it is remarkable how fast Christianity grew in the first 300 years of its existence. Stark writes that the teachings of Christianity were radical for the culture. The idea that God loves you was completely foreign to pagans who considered their gods as indifferent or selfish. The idea that God wants you to love others was way different than the worship of pagan gods. The pagan gods demanded sacrifices of food, drink, and money and those goods essentially just bankrolled the priests' party fund.

Stark essentially argues that Christianity grew when they put those radical teachings of love and care into practice. The Christians reached out to Jews who weren't always receptive to the message of the Gospel. The Christians welcomed people both rich and poor, and that went against the society that was divided by how much you owned. The Christians welcomed people of all cultures, and that was a way to unify an empire that spanned many languages and ways of life

The Christians had no fear of death because they knew Jesus would raise them to eternal life, so when pandemics hit that would kill up to a quarter of the population, the Christians cared for their own, and even their pagan neighbors. In an age before medicine and epidemiology, it turns out that one of the best medicines for sickness is giving food and water to the sick rather than leaving them to die alone. To the pagans, the Christians higher survival rate could have seemed nothing more than miraculous.

On this life Sunday, we also consider that one of the biggest draws to Christianity was their treatment of women. In a population where the ratio of men to women was 7 to 5, the early church had more women than men. Why? The Church upheld marriage and called men to be faithful to their wives. The Church valued life at all stages and outlawed abortion and the killing of infants outside of the womb, especially baby girls who were less desired than baby boys.

We could say more of the missions in the era of ocean faring of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries as lands such as sub-Saharan Africa, the Americas, and southeast Asia were discovered or rediscovered by Christians, but that is a tale for another time. Suffice it to say that the light of the early Christians traveled to homes of those non-believers who were indeed dwelling in darkness.

Finally, III. We shine His light everywhere we go. Christ is calling us too to His light before others that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Light travels as the Word that became flesh comes and dwells us in through His Word preached, taught, and read, through the regular confession and forgiveness of sins, and the regular reception of the Lord's Supper to strengthen our faith and to embolden us to love one another.

This shining of light is something that happens through the Holy Spirit alone as He alone empowers us through these means to practice what we preach. Two weeks ago we talked about the Holy Spirit gathering His Church, last week we talked about the Holy Spirit enlightening and sanctifying His Church. Today we talk about how the Holy Spirit calls the Church.

Stark argues that the early Church grew not primarily through evangelistic revivals or mass conversions in the marketplace, but by Christians sharing their faith with the people who already knew and trusted them. “Go and make disciples of all nations” might be better translated as, “As you are going, make disciples of all nations” And so, we as Christians fulfill the Great Commission not only by

funding both domestic and foreign missionaries as we will discuss at our voters' meeting when we approve a budget that has funding those missionaries as a keystone to the way we spend money. But we also, as we are going, tell others the reason why we are more joyful than at a thanksgiving meal and happier than Superbowl champions.

Light travels. The places you go and the people you see are the ones the Holy Spirit has set in front of you to share the Gospel. Not simply theoretical orphans in Africa, as much as we love orphans in Africa.

The first person you see is the one whose hands and feet you stare at when you get out bed, namely, you! The first person to share the Good News with is yourself! Commit to a lifestyle of hearing that Good News regularly through regular church attendance and a routine home devotional life. You can't lead others to the light if you don't spend time there.

From there, God has given us people to shine His light upon, and it's not only unbelievers. You have the privilege to tell your spouse, kids, parents, and whole family that Jesus loves them. You have the gift to forgive them when they sin against you. You can discuss with them what it means to live as a Christian.

From there, you have the privilege to shine His light upon others you come into contact with. This happens at neighborhood community meetings, club events, and dinner parties. It happens on the sidelines of soccer games and on bleachers of the basketball court.

It isn't a script and it isn't a sales pitch. As the Holy Spirit fills us up with His Word, He empowers us to be the same people we are at church as we are in the baseball stadium or at the bar, the same people who care for others as bought and purchased by the blood of Christ. The same people who have a compassionate ear to hear others problems. The same people who would even offer to pray for others, not just generally, but on the spot.

The darkness of life is still going to overshadow our lives and those around us, and its that darkness that gives the light a chance to stand out. As those we interact with daily know that we care about them, they'll know who to talk to when the troubles come, and that is our opportunity to share the hope we have within us.

Light still travels, and we can be hopeful that in 2023, the Lord Jesus Christ will bless His Church with many people hearing the Gospel.