

This woman had a greater source of light that she didn't utilize. May the same not be said of us as we enter this next year. May we be intentional about following closely our source of light, and the clarity He brings. For we have the promise of light that can pierce moments of uncertainty and darkness in our lives. We have the promise of an eternal compass that can lead us along paths before us, even when they're new and unfamiliar. We have the promise of one who has not only created and saved us, but wants to also guide us in life, in every way we need.

Jesus assures us, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

Yes, new circumstances may bring uncertainty—but but praise God, Jesus brings clarity!

## STUDY GUIDE BRIGHTER • John 8:12-19

### **UP:** Connect with God Through Spending Time in God's Word

Read our passage for the week, John 8:12-19. Allow a few moments to silently reflect on what you heard. Read it one more time.

- What do you notice about our passage? What stands out to you? What questions do you have after reading the passage?
- Reread verse 12. In your own words, what is Jesus saying about Himself? What does it mean to have the light of life?
- What does it mean that those who follow Jesus will never walk through darkness? Does this mean Christians will not experience dark times? Why or why not?
- As we think about the year ahead, Jesus promises that He is our light. Every step, whatever the future holds, the Lord's presence goes with us. Name one situation in your life right now where you need the Lord's guidance.
- Why do you think the Lord guides us step by step and doesn't simply illuminate the whole road ahead?
- What is a word, phrase, or thought from today's passage that God seems to be lifting up as being significant for you? How does it speak to a current situation in your life? How is God inviting you to respond?

### **IN:** Connect with the Family of God

- If you had to pick one or two words to describe your life last year, what would it be? Why?
- If you picked one or two words as a prayer for the coming year, what would it be? Why?
- Share your reflections this week with a brother or sister in Christ.

### **OUT:** Connect with the World Around Us by Joining God in God's Mission

Step by step the Lord leads us. Spend some time praying for the year ahead. Pray that the Lord would use you to bless others. After you pray, consider where the Lord might be inviting you to serve others. What does the Lord have for you in the year ahead?

**For ideas on where to serve in our city, contact Laura Mueller at [lmuller@first-pres.org](mailto:lmuller@first-pres.org).**

# BRIGHTER

The light of Christ is brighter than all competing lights. He is the light shining out of darkness. In our own darkness, we search for light and sometimes attach to lesser lights. Faces and rooms lit by television, computer and phone screens are a familiar scene in our world. What light are we looking for? Brighter, truer, more beautiful is the eternal light we find in Jesus Christ.

## BRIGHTER • John 1:1-14 • John Goodale • December 31, 2017

A few years ago my wife Deborah and I visited New England for the first time. Before going out for a drive one day, we looked up directions online. They worked great . . . on the way to where we were going. On the way home, I became the most lost I've ever been. I didn't know how to get back, and didn't even know where we were! Everything was unfamiliar. Finally, Deborah wisely pulled up a navigation tool on her phone, and it guided us back.

I was reminded that day that new circumstances bring uncertainty. In just a few hours, we'll turn our calendars from 2017, and move into the unknown of 2018. In one respect, we're really just moving from one day to the next, like we do any other time of the year. In reality, though, this annual changing of the calendar shifts our attention from the familiarity of the past year to an unfamiliar new year. This brings uncertainty of the surprises and challenges ahead, and how we'll respond.

New circumstances occur more frequently than an annual changing of the calendar. Any unfamiliar experience can prompt us to feel uncertain, anxious or overwhelmed. Perhaps there's a diagnosis of cancer for us or for a loved one. Or we may find ourselves suddenly single after the death or divorce of a spouse. New transitions in life like a new job, a new relationship, retirement, or relocation can bring their own uncertainty.

While new circumstances bring uncertainty, Jesus brings clarity. Listen again to His declaration: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). Note that Jesus doesn't say He's a light in the world, but that He's the light of the world. We learn that Jesus' light is enough to pierce the darkness and uncertainty of this world and of our lives.

Scholar Dale Bruner notes that this claim is Christo-exclusive: only Christ is the true light of the world. Jesus' use of two definite articles in the first sentence of this verse results in an emphatic statement: He, and no one else or nothing else is the light of the world. He is the true source of light for us. Jesus' subsequent reference to being "the light of life" points to the life-giving direction and wisdom that His light provides us.

Not only is Jesus' light enough, Jesus' light is for all. Bruner now refers to this claim as Christo-inclusive: Christ is for the whole world. Note the first word Jesus uses after His description of Himself as light: it's the word "Whoever." This word underscores the inclusiveness and personal-ness of Jesus' promise; anyone can claim it.

Previously in the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah described our need for light and understanding when he observed, "We look for light, but all is darkness; for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows. Like the blind we grope along the wall, feeling our way like men without eyes" (Isaiah 59:9-10). Jesus has come to be our light in places of darkness and uncertainty. Our creator came to guide us in making the most of the life He's given us. Our redeemer came to reveal how we can enjoy personal relationship with God forever.

Jesus is our eternal navigational resource, who leads us in unfamiliar paths of life. We receive Jesus' light through His teaching, through the example He set during His years here on earth, and through the influence of the Holy Spirit. Jesus assures us He can cut through the darkness of uncertainty in our lives and in our world, and reveal to us how to live well. New circumstances bring uncertainty, but Jesus brings clarity.

Before we go any further, let's ask what some may be thinking: how much clarity does Jesus' light really provide? After all, what about those moments when our questions of God have gone unanswered? Who of us hasn't struggled at times with the mystery of God's timing and seeming lack of activity in our lives? The psalmists put voice to such moments when they cried out to God, "Why?" and "How long?" How do we reconcile our spiritual lack of clarity at times with Jesus' promise of light?

It is true that God won't always satisfy our desire to understand all He's doing in our lives. But He will always provide what we need in the moment. Think about a car's headlights at night. They don't illuminate all the darkness that surrounds us, but they do pierce the darkness immediately before us, allowing us to continue forward, mile after mile. Similarly, Jesus' light shines just far enough ahead that we can continue moving forward, day after day.

Would we like more clarity at times about what God is up to and why? Sure we would. But if we understood everything, faith wouldn't be necessary and we'd be less dependent upon and connected to Him. Earlier in worship, we affirmed a similar dynamic in the Lord's Prayer, asking for our daily bread. Jesus will provide the light and bread we need today—and tomorrow He'll be there for us to turn to again.

Perhaps some may ask how much light Jesus really brings, when the world is still such a dark place? 2017 has been a very dark year for our world, and we have no assurance 2018 will be any better. But here's the thing about Jesus' promise: it's extended to all, but not experienced by all. This promise made no difference to religious leaders in the crowd that day; they didn't take Him up on it. Their non-responsiveness reminds us that Jesus' promises always await our response. Wonderful as any promise is in the Bible, it's up to us to grab hold of it, and to position ourselves to receive it. The unfortunate fact is that fewer people are doing this today, leading to a greater darkness in our world. This creates a greater need for us to display Christ's light in the world through our lives.

Jesus' words, "Whoever follows me" (John 12:8) reveal a choice that will determine whether we'll experience His light. It's a choice to make Jesus our Lord, and to commit our lives to following Him. This choice will always be prompted by a self-awareness of darkness in our life, and our need for the light Jesus offers. As John Calvin noted many years ago, "We must first see the need for seeking this light. For none will ever present themselves to Christ to be enlightened save those who have known both that this world is darkness and that they themselves are altogether blind."

Perhaps you're thinking that you already made this choice to follow God years ago, or even this year. If so, it'll be helpful to know that the Greek tense used here by Jesus has a continuous sense: "the one who is following me." He's speaking here not of a one-time following, but following Jesus as a continuous, ongoing action. Additionally, the word used here for "follow" is the same word used elsewhere for discipleship. It suggests a constant commitment to remain close enough to Jesus that we can see where His light is leading us. We do this by

reading Jesus' words frequently, and by seeking to live out the values and character we see in His life.

As was so often the case during Jesus' ministry, His claim here was challenged by the religious leaders. First, they questioned His lack of other witnesses to Jesus' claim: "The Pharisees challenged him, 'Here you are, appearing as your own witness; your testimony is not valid'" (John 8:13). Then they challenged His reference to the sending Father: "Then they asked him, 'Where is your father?'" (John 8:19)

These challenges were intended to weaken and undermine Jesus' promise of light. Other challenges in life today have similar potential to threaten our confidence in Jesus' promise of light. Overwhelming circumstances may suggest Jesus' light won't really be enough for us. We may have personal doubts about His ability to lead us along new and unfamiliar paths. Growing voices in the darkness of our world increasingly question the relevancy and sufficiency of Jesus' light. Against these headwinds of potential challenges, it's essential that we closely follow our source of light.

At this point in the year, Christmas songs and gatherings are winding down, and decorations will soon be put away. Our inclination is to think of Christmas as behind us for another year. But for those who follow Christ, who draw life from the light He provides, the message and meaning of Christmas continues with us into the new year that lies ahead. Our Advent theme, "Jesus shines brighter", is an everyday reality, not just a Christmas one. The same God who loved us so much to enter our world, and who eventually gave His life for ours, promises to be a constant presence and light to guide through all we experience in the next year and beyond.

A woman lived on the seashore in Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century. She was quite wealthy, but also very frugal. It surprised those who knew her, therefore, when she chose to be among the first to have electricity in her home. A few weeks after the installation, a meter reader appeared at the woman's door, asking if things were working ok, because her meter didn't show much usage. The woman responded, "I use it every day. Each evening when the sun sets, I turn on my lights just long enough to light my candles; then I turn them off!"