

LIGHT + LIFE

Jesus is the light of the world. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. "In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind" (John 1:4). Light is associated with knowledge. There is knowledge to share, insight to gain. When we are in the dark, we are blind; but when we are in the light, we see. Light is purifying truth. Life is a little different. When we think of life, we think of activity. Jesus brings a new way of life, a new way of living in this world. His ways are actually life-bringing instead of life-sucking. Following the mission of Jesus means being those who convey His light and His life to the world.

LIGHT AND LIFE • Luke 2:21–32

Tim McConnell with Pastor Youssef Samir • January 13, 2019

Well, I'm still not preaching for you today. Sorry! I would be, but an extraordinary opportunity is ours today and I couldn't pass it up. We begin a new series, Light and Life. We have adopted a mission statement here at First Pres—Christ has called us to be **"Light and Life for the City."** So for eight weeks, we are going to talk about just what it means to be light and life, including a very special **Vision Sunday** two weeks from today.

It starts with this passage in Luke 2 where it is immediately acknowledged by Simeon that this Jesus who has been born is not just a light for the Hebrews, in fulfillment of prophecy, in the course of God's redemptive work for all people; Jesus is a "light for revelation to the Gentiles." Jesus is light for all people. I couldn't pass up the opportunity to spend time this morning, on this topic, with our friend **Pastor Youssef Samir**, Lead Pastor of Heliopolis Evangelical Church in Cairo, Egypt, to share and actually embody this truth: **Jesus is a Light for All People.** Welcome Pastor Youssef Samir of Heliopolis Evangelical Church, our church partner in Egypt for many years.

TM: Please tell us about yourself and your church.

YS: My name is Youssef (Joseph in English). I grew up in a Christian family through which the Holy Spirit worked in my heart to be a true Christian. I graduated first from the Faculty of Languages in Cairo with a B.A. in French literature and translation. In one of the toughest periods in my life, which was my military service, the Lord clearly called me to the pastoral career. So, after completing my military time, I joined the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo and graduated in 1998.

For the first 12 years in my ministry journey, I served as assistant and then associate pastor in my home church (1998–2010). In 2010, I started my ministry as assistant pastor at HEC. In 2015, I became the senior pastor. I also teach two courses at the Evangelical Theological Seminary

in Cairo (Biblical Preaching, History of Christian Worship).

At the present time, I am studying in a Doctoral Program at the Institute of Worship Studies in Jacksonville, Florida. My wife Nermine works as an Arabic tutor for foreigners. I have two children—a son, Michael, in his third year at the University of Chicago studying in political science; and a daughter, Sara, in her second year at Cairo University studying in Mass Communication School.

About Heliopolis Evangelical Church—The Evangelical Church in Egypt started with the coming of the first Scottish missionaries who first settled in Upper Egypt by the middle of the 19th century. As for HEC, it was founded in 1922. I am the fourth senior pastor for the church since its foundation.

The size of our congregation is about 2,000 members and around the same number attend the church without being registered members. This makes it the second largest congregation in Egypt, and possibly in the whole Middle East. Our partnership with First Pres began in 2011 when I received an invitation from your church to attend a partnership conference that was held on this campus. Since then there has been a very powerful and blessed partnership between our two churches.

TM: What gives you and Heliopolis strength to carry on in a non-Christian environment?

YS: Being a Christian in a Middle Eastern country is not easy. And being a minority of the minority intensifies the position of the Evangelical Church. However, I can discern the power of God in the midst of so many difficulties that the church in Egypt is facing. I can see the divine power in the prayer of the whole church in the midst of these difficult situations.

The difficult years of the Arab spring revolutions

and the dominion of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt have witnessed a very powerful wave of prayers throughout the country. On November 11, 2011 a very large prayer meeting with more than 70,000 Christians from the different churches and denominations gathered to pray for Egypt. On a local scale, I believe that the prayers of our congregation and our brothers abroad (like yours) are the secret that continues to sustain us in our ministry in Egypt.

TM: How is the church sustained in times of persecution and threat?

YS: During the last five years, the Christian Church in Egypt has witnessed one of the worst waves of terrorist attacks in its history. They were planned and executed by Islamic terrorists from MB, ISIS and some Islamic terrorists who came to Egypt from Lybia and Gaza.

Two incidents—(1) The slaughtering of 21 Egyptian Coptic poor workers from the same village on the shores of Lybia by Isis in February 2015. The courageous spirit which they showed before their deaths was a real inspiration for many of us in Egypt. The Egyptian government proved its solidarity with Christians, as a military raid was executed on the ISIS sites in Lybia the next day. (2) The bombing of a Coptic Church in downtown Cairo in December 2016 and of two churches in Alexandria during Palm Sunday celebrations in April 2017. There were more than 50 dead and hundreds of wounded people.

To say the truth, there are divine lights in the midst of those incidents: The MB, when they took over the presidency in Egypt, kept saying that they would stay in control for not less than 500 years. You know what? Because of the prayers of the church in Egypt, they stepped down in less than one year!

We thank God for our President el-Sisi, who shows big support for Christians. He is the first president in the history of Egypt to take the initiative to visit the Coptic Cathedral during the Christmas celebration and to congratulate the

Christians for Christmas and New Year.

TM: What do you believe Simeon was saying about the Light of Christ in Luke 2:29–32?

YS: In the well-known story of Saul's meeting with the Lord on the road to Damascus in Acts 9, the Lord asked him: "Why do you persecute me?" The Lord identifies Himself with the church everywhere in all times.

When we celebrate Christmas, we celebrate Jesus Christ who identifies with His people in all the world: "He is a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel." When something hurts the church in Egypt, Yemen or Syria, it hurts the Lord and His people everywhere.

In Saul's story, before meeting Jesus, he saw a great light. We consider ourselves this pre-conversion light to our culture. Those who are not believers will ask, "Who is Jesus?" because they see the light in our lives. We are as the voice of the Baptist, preparing the way for the Lord. Jesus called Himself the light of the world, and He called us to be the light of the world.

I want to tell you about a poor mother who lost her daughter in a terrorist attack. She was interviewed on television, and the interviewer was pushing her to say words of revenge, but she kept saying, "I bless them; I forgive them; I pray that they may come to the Lord." So the interviewer was just blown up. He kept saying, "Who are you Christians? From which stone are you shaped? I cannot imagine that there are people on earth like you who can forgive the killers of their sons and daughters."

On another television interview, with a prominent Muslim interviewer, the interviewer said, "I want to assure you Muslims in our country that God is blessing Egypt because of the presence of Christians." This never happens. *This* is the light of the Lord in our country.

TM: Thank you Youssef. This is the character of the body of believers in Egypt, who are standing for Christ in times of great persecution and struggle

Over the past 5–8 years, they have suffered in very public ways, but at the same time, it has opened the gospel up in Egypt.

Our partnership with HEC started in 2011. At that time, we heard stories that churches couldn't even pull building permits to expand their buildings, let alone plant churches. Because Christians have stayed faithful to Christ and dedicated to the peace and prosperity of their nation, the government has started to open things up to Christians and is now saying to churches like HEC, "You can plant as many churches as you like." They even have the army restoring churches that have been attacked by Islamic terrorism. This is not something that many Christians could have even perceived would happen in their lifetime, but the Lord has done it, and He is doing it through His faithfulness through you, Youssef, and the people of your church, and we're so excited to be with you on this adventure, and we're praying for what happens next.

STUDY GUIDE

LIGHT AND LIFE • LIGHT FOR ALL PEOPLE

Luke 2:21–32

UP: Connect With God Through Spending Time in His Word

Read aloud the passage for the week: Luke 2:21–32. Allow a few moments to silently reflect on what you heard. Underline or note any words or phrases that seem meaningful.

1. What do you think of Simeon's response when Joseph and Mary brought Jesus into the temple? What is your response when God intercedes in your life?
2. Simeon waited for the restoration of Israel and is identified as righteous, devout, and moved by God's Spirit. When you are in a season of waiting do you adopt any specific practices? How could you or have you pursued God in these seasons?
3. Simeon announces that the good news of Christ is for all nations. How would you define the "Good News" of Jesus Christ? How can this news be received in a world with so many different values, beliefs, traditions, and thoughts?
4. How is the good news that was relevant for Simeon two thousand years ago still relevant today?
5. It is our mission to carry the light of Christ. How can you intentionally carry out this mission?

IN: Connect with Each Other

Consider places of doubt in your life, places where you find it hard to believe that Christ really can shine His light to illuminate truth. Pray for those areas or people specifically.

OUT: Connect With the World Around Us (Join God in His Mission)

Take time to create a personal mission statement. Try to include this grand mission we are invited to partake in, that of carrying the light of Christ. Write down the mission statement and revisit it throughout the next month.