

February 5, 2023
Isaiah 58:1-9a
Matthew 5:13-20

Let Your Light Shine

There was something about Rev. McGregor. From the moment I met him, he became one of my favorite people. He insisted I call him Stewart. Even though he was about 70 years old and a retired minister in the church of Scotland. He had greyish-white-ish hair that was something of a mess. And scraggly teeth. And eyes with deep wrinkles from smiling. That's because Stewart smiled all the time. He glowed with warmth and kindness. He was comfortable with everyone and everyone was comfortable around him.

Stewart was the interim minister at the church I attended in Edinburgh, Scotland while I was there for school. He was not your typical church of Scotland minister, serious and sort of self-important. Stewart joked. He laughed easily. He was positive about everything. Nothing seemed to bother him. One day, we went to lunch at a cafe around the corner from the church. It was the kind that had a rainbow flag out front, and it was always full of young people with tattoos and piercings. Stewart was unfazed by any of it. He just smiled and spoke warmly to the staff. And

he spoke warmly to me about life and about God. All of my young adult anxiety melted away. He made me feel as if there was nothing to be afraid of and everything to look forward to. Stewart was a light in the dark for me. A beacon of hope and gentleness, illuminating my world, reassuring me that God was there and there would always be a way forward.

Maybe you know someone like that. Someone who is a light in the world. Someone who illuminates things and shines with love and grace. Who helps you see what is real and what matters. And that we live in a kind and loving universe made by a kind and loving God. This person believes it with their whole being, and they help you believe too.

Jesus was a light in the world like that. And he taught his disciples to be a light as well. That their faith in God's kingdom where the least were the greatest and the last were first, it would shine like a beacon in the dark. It would encourage others and give others hope. "YOU are the light of the world. Jesus said. 'YOU are a city on a hill, a lamp illuminating a house. The strength of your faith will chase away the

shadows. It will chase away doubt. The love and forgiveness within you will shine, and bring others to love and forgive.”

YOU are the light of the world, Jesus says. And that’s what the world needs, it needs light. It needs hope. It needs people who believe there can be something more than war and hatred. Something more than trauma and death. Our hearts are broken every day by news of another shooting. Another day of unrest in Ukraine and Haiti and Palestine. The rising suicides in the armed forces, the inhumane conditions in our prisons, the despair in our young people. There are not enough teachers and not enough nurses and not enough foster homes. Sometimes we had to turn off the news and escape from the dark, forget the dark, distract ourselves from the dark. But it's never far. We hear from a friend who has a terminal illness. They cut our benefits at work. Addiction rears its ugly head. Our families and friendships are broken by politics and grudges and blame. The walls close in. The darkness closes in.

The darkness is real. The emptiness, the blank void where we can’t see any meaning or purpose. And the darkness is why Jesus came. To help us escape. To set us free. To give us hope and life again. He doesn’t hide

from the dark or deny the dark or run from the dark. He shines in the dark and is not overcome. And he says that we will not be overcome by it either. The dark does not have the final say.

YOU are the light of the world, Jesus says. As my disciples, YOU shine in the dark. You bring hope. You reveal that there is something more, something bigger, something better. Something that is above and beyond, and you let people see it. You chase away the shadows and show people there is nothing to fear. Like a streetlight. Like a nightlight. Like a candle in the window. You hold out the promise that the darkness is not all there is. There is hope; there is love. There is still life. And for those in the dark, it makes a difference. For those without light, it is everything. That's what I want you to do as my disciples.

Jesus calls his followers to be light in the world. He wants them, he wants us to be kind and generous and forgiving. He wants us to light up the world that is in the shadows of fear and resentment. He echoes the words of the prophet Isaiah. Hundreds of years before Jesus, it was dark. The people of Israel were surrounded by shadowy threats. They were threatened by war and foreign invasion and families were breaking and

society was falling apart. Some ignored it. Some denied it. Some pretended to care, but really didn't. They would complain: "Why are things so bad? Why are things such a mess? We go to the temple. We make our sacrifices and offerings. We observe our fasts. Why isn't it enough for God?" Because, Isaiah says, you don't really want to be the light. You don't want to do the work of change. You don't want to practice justice and righteousness. Look, you oppress your workers. You fight and you quarrel. You do selfish, cruel things and you hide from the suffering around you." You don't want the light. You don't want to see the truth. You don't want to BE the light. And that's what God's people are supposed to be. They are supposed to be a light in the dark.

The people of God are supposed to shine. They are supposed stand for love and grace and hope. They are supposed to help those who sit in darkness, not ignore them. You are a city on a hill, Jesus says, a bright spot of hope, a shelter for those in the wilderness. Wandering on the scary paths with bandits and wild animals and treacherous terrain. You are the light. You show the way. You offer safety. You offer strength.

You are the promise of a home with a warm room and a fireplace and a peaceful night's sleep.

YOU are the light that helps others find their way. You don't shine only for yourselves. You shine for the world. Because that's what the world needs. It needs people shining light in the dark. Because you don't know what darkness someone else is facing. Officer Crain is the school resource officer at Northside elementary. He is a police officer. But he is also a traffic director. A heavy box carrier. A table stacker. A silly joke teller. A hallway high-fiver. A lunchroom cleaner-upper. And he knows every kid and their family. Officer Crain does his work calmly and quietly. He is focused and centered. Everyone around him knows he is safe. Everyone knows he can be trusted. He is a light in our little school. And I bet you know someone like that too. Someone who is a light. Someone who shows up; someone who cares. Someone who always does the right thing even if its hard. Someone who inspires others to keep going every day. These saints don't always have halos, but they are there. Giving light to the world.

Jesus tells us, YOU are the light of the world. You shine in the darkness, and it does not overcome you. YOU are light and you shine so that others can see. YOU are the light and you never stop being the light. And your light cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket, Jesus says. No one builds a city on the top of a hill and then tries to conceal it. You cannot conceal the light that is in you. Don't cover it up or try to hide it. This is who you are in me.

Do you remember the movie ET? I remember it because it came out when I was 8 years old, and it made a big impression on 8-year-old me. In one scene, ET is very sick. And (spoiler alert if you haven't seen it) everyone thinks ET is dead. The scientists are about to take ET's body away. But Elliott, his best friend, discovers that ET is still alive. His heart is glowing with light. Elliott doesn't want the scientists to see it, so he tries to cover ET with a blanket. The glow will give them away.

Sometimes, we try to cover up the light in us. We try to cover up our hope in something bigger than the things of this world. We try to conceal our burning desire for something more, something eternal. We put it underneath all the other things in life. We don't want to re-order

things. We don't want to offend anyone. We don't want to risk being different from others. We just want Jesus to be OUR light. We don't want to have to be a light for others or be an example. We hide ourselves. We put a basket over ourselves. We hope someone else will stand out and stand up. Just like the scribes and Pharisees in Jesus' day. They created excuses. They found loopholes. It would cost them too much to love from the bottom up instead of the top down. But righteousness isn't righteousness unless it's who you do and who you are no matter what.

A light is a light. A lamp is put on a stand so it can illuminate a house. A city is built on a hill so other can see it even in the dark. A light dispels the shadows. It helps you see and show the way. But how often do we settle for less than that? How often do we hide our light hoping someone else will be the light? How often do we cover up the light of Christ in us with bitterness and anger? How often do we cover it with pessimism and negativity? How often do we hide that light under a basket because we are afraid it isn't enough, and that the darkness will overcome us?

But no one lights a lamp so they can hide it under a basket, Jesus says. No one builds a city in order to conceal it. And I did not call YOU and bless you with faith, so that you could put a bag over your head. I didn't give you the light of hope so you could despair. I didn't give you the light of my word so you could keep it to yourselves. You are the light of the world. You are the beacon of joy and redemption. Your faith inspires faith. Your belief gives others reason to believe. Your hope encourages others to hope that there is something the darkness cannot overcome. We are the light of the world, each one of us, together. We gather at this table and remember those brave enough to shine. Those brave enough to believe in love and forgiveness. And we rejoice in the light of Christ who has dispelled all of OUR darkness. And gives us strength and hope. Because he is faithful to the end, shining to the end, so we can find our way home.