

Grace to you and peace from God, our Creator, and from our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Anytime we read the Bible, it's important to remember that there are two perspectives already in place. The first, is what was going on in the world at the time the events themselves happened. And the second is what was going on in the world at the time someone sat down and recorded the events to get them on paper, so to speak.

Those two perspectives are always there. The gift of that is that we know that the events were recorded in such a way that it helped people make sense of what was going on in the world around them.

And that allows space for us to add *our* perspective – our own understanding and interpretation. Because the Bible is a living document. It isn't just words on a page about things that happened centuries ago. The events, stories, and people contained within it still influence us and shape how we respond to the events going on in our lives and the world.

It provides comfort and challenge and everything in between, because woven through it is God's grace and love for the world – which have never changed. They've remained the same from the beginning.

For us as Christians, God's grace and love were most clearly revealed in Jesus. God's son. And because we live in the time that we do, our experiences and understanding of Jesus are different than they were when the events of his life happened, and when they were written down.

At the time Jesus walked the earth, he was everything a lot of people hoped the Messiah would be. The miracles he performed, "signs" as they're called in John's gospel, and the way he challenged authority renewed their hope and faith in God in a way that hadn't happened for a very long time.

He was like a light shining in the darkness, one that could potentially illumine the whole world.

But along with that, the first believers *and* the Temple authorities were also challenged by Jesus and the things he said. The claims he made about his identity and the character of God upended generations of understanding.

And in the case of this reading, Jesus' claim about his identity as the light of the world, and God as his witness to his identity, tested the *actual* law. The Pharisees, who were the religious leaders responsible for the interpretation of the law, challenged *Jesus*. They wanted to make sure that what Jesus said was credible under *their* understanding of the law.

And in this conversation, it's clear that they and Jesus are approaching the matter of testimony to the truth from two different perspectives. And by the time their conversation ends, they're at a stalemate.

But the tension between Jesus and the Pharisees remained, and it had been building even before this. Jesus' teachings were becoming more difficult, even for his disciples. And the leaders of the synagogue were already looking for a reason to kill him. Jesus knew this, and he still kept going with his teachings and his ministry.

If we hit "pause" on that for a minute, and move ahead a few decades to the community that John wrote for in this gospel, Jesus' actions in the face of that tension were incredibly encouraging for John's community.

In the late first and early second centuries, people in that part of the world lived under Roman rule. Like, full-on imperial domination. Politically and socially speaking, it was a dark time for the majority of people.

Because only a select few enjoyed the privilege that came with Roman rule. Everyone else was squashed down – including the early Christians.

But as they heard the words of Jesus in John's gospel, they remembered God's grace and love for the world revealed in Jesus. That it was at the root of everything Jesus did, and they trusted that it endured.

So, for them, the idea of Jesus as the light of the world kept them going. They understood that Jesus' teachings didn't end with his death. For them, Jesus as the light of the world was a prophetic announcement of liberation and freedom that could potentially overthrow the darkness of their time.

In other words, the newness of what God did through Jesus that was so challenging to the earlier followers and the Pharisees, was *good news* – gospel – to John's community. It gave them the lens they needed to interpret what was going on around them, and the courage they needed to hold onto *their* faith.

Ultimately, it shaped their mission as a church, small as it was. Because they recognized that even though everything around them could be described as darkness, Jesus was the light guiding their way.

For us, as people of faith, the events of scripture and the events of the world are inextricably linked together. And that is so because God's grace and love, the work and teachings of Jesus, are inextricably linked with our world.

All of scripture, but for us as Christians – especially the teachings of Jesus, informs the way we live. It helps us discern when and how to respond to the events in our lives and the world around us.

In the course of that discernment, it often challenges our understanding of God and Jesus. It almost always brings up more questions than answers – ask anyone who's ever been in a Bible study group and they'll tell you about their experiences with that.

But as we engage with scripture, and even struggle with it, it deepens our understanding of it. Even changing it from what it once might have been. Almost none of us have the same relationship with scripture that we did when we were younger.

But along the way we have learned that woven together with the challenges and the questions, and the changes in us, are God's grace and love for the world – which have remained the same from the beginning. They are the source, the grounding, for everything we do in the midst of what's going on around us. They shape who we are. They shape the mission of our church.

And they reveal the light that is Jesus.

On January 24th, after Alex Pretti was killed in Minneapolis, there was a candlelight vigil called “Shine a Light for Minnesota.” It came out of Alex Pretti's death, but it was for everyone in Minnesota. And social media being what it is, word about the vigil spread throughout the world.

People were encouraged to light a candle that evening in solidarity and community with the people of Minnesota. If it was safe to gather outside with others in their neighborhood, to do that. Many did, and many others simply lit a candle and put it in their window.

It was a reminder that, no matter how dark things get, light still shines. And for us as Christians, it was a reminder that the light that is Jesus still guides our way.

Not unlike the first century, there are a lot of events in our world that can be described as dark or darkness – authoritarianism, racism, greed, White Christian Nationalism, inequitable economic policies, sexual exploitation and human trafficking.

There are events in people's lives, too – unemployment, underemployment, medical crises, financial insecurity. Even life itself, for some, is dark.

There are times when it seems the things that are dark have won. But scripture reminds us that Jesus is the light of the world. The light that darkness cannot overcome.

In this season, between now and Easter, our readings will continue to more fully reveal who Jesus is. I encourage you to engage with them outside of this space. I am encouraging you to read the Bible!



And I also encourage you to intentionally look for the light that is Jesus – look for it in your life and in our world – because it *is* there. Open your heart to what it might look like, especially if it challenges you and ends up being different than what you’re expecting.

And if that’s too much, because sometimes it can be, take up the practice of lighting a candle daily. If you live in a place that doesn’t allow open flame, use a battery operated one. Set aside some time each day, even just a few minutes, and offer a prayer for the places that the light that is Jesus is needed most.

And offer a prayer of thanksgiving that it is *already* there in some way.

May these practices both challenge and comfort you. And may they offer a tangible reminder that the light that is Jesus still guides our way today and always.

Thanks be to God! Amen.