

GOD IS LIGHT

Genesis 1:1-5

Isaiah 60:1-5

1 John 1:5

John 1:1-5

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SCRIPTURE

¹In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day (Genesis 1:1-5 NRSV).

¹Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. ²For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. ³Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. ⁴Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses’ arms. ⁵Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you (Isaiah 60:1-5 NRSV).

⁵This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. ⁶If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; ⁷but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:5-9 NRSV).

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being

through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it (John 1:1-5 NRSV).

MESSAGE

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus presented himself to his cousin John for baptism. The heavens were opened, the Holy Spirit came upon him like a dove and God said:

"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17; see also Psalm 2:7).

The Baptism of the Lord is celebrated in January of each year. As Christians, we not only remember Jesus' baptism, but we also remember that we were baptized into Christ and are called to live out the meaning of our baptism on a daily basis.

For over a millennia, the festival of Christ's baptism has also been called the "Feast of Light." This is not to be confused with the "Festival of Lights." Many different cultures and religions observe something akin to a "Festival of Lights." It is celebrated by Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists around the world. Judaism also has a Festival of Lights but it is usually referred to as Hanukkah.

Many communities have adopted a "Festival of Lights." Typically it is a way to celebrate Christmas without using the word "Christmas." Battle Creek's International Festival of Lights was from November 18 through December 31, 2017.

But I am talking about the Feast of Light. Light has been associated with baptism from the beginning. Although the New Testament does not mention any unusual appearances of light at Christ's baptism, all four gospel writers do record that "the heavens were opened." Christians have traditionally understood this to imply a dramatic display of light from heaven.

The vast majority of Christians around the world use a ritual with water called "baptism" to represent entrance to or identification with the church. Baptism is identification with the church. The word as it is used in the New Testament represents a great many other things, as well, including the light of God. The light of baptism points us to God. In fact, John says, "God is light." We should consider the different qualities of light and how thinking about them leads to thinking about who God is and what God is doing in our lives.

We can only see a small portion of the light spectrum. There's ultraviolet light; you can't see that. Then there's visible light that breaks down into all the colors human beings are capable of seeing. Then there's infrared light; we can't see that either. But just because you can't see it, that doesn't mean it's not there.

The Bible says God:

"Dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see" (1 Timothy 6:16).

Just like ultraviolet and infrared light. But on the other hand, in Jesus, God, who is invisible, becomes visible. We get to see God's light in him! In a manner of speaking, God the Father is like ultraviolet light; God the Spirit is like infrared light; and God the Son is like the visible light.

In a purely practical sense, physical light is probably one of the greatest gifts God has ever given humankind. We owe much to the physical light we used to discover the knowledge we have. With light we can find things we need to survive or make us comfortable. If it weren't for light, we'd never see all the textures, shapes and colors in the world around us. In fact, physical light is so important to our existence that some cultures worship it. But that would be idolatry. God is like light, because he created it, but he is not the same thing as his creation. We thank God for the sun and the light it gives but we don't worship the sun. We worship the Creator of the sun.

Light is a symbol for such abstract ideas as goodness or truth or understanding. Darkness, on the other hand, is the symbol for just the opposite. Think about the Star Wars movies. You know, there's the "Force" which Luke Skywalker served. And then there was the "Dark Side" which Darth Vader served. One was good, the other evil. But in Star Wars the "Dark Side" was still part of the "Force." The Bible, however, makes it clear that God has no dark side. He is only good and light. And he sent Jesus to be the Light of the world!

John describes the reception Jesus Christ, the Light of the world, received from the world. There's a note of sorrow in John's words in the first chapter of his Gospel.

"He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him" (John 1:10).

Isn't that strange? Jesus is obviously the light. He shines the way out of sin and misery into a joyful and loving life with God and neighbor. And yet so many people, then and

now, reject him. Why do you suppose that is?

One reason is that Jesus and the light he brings are so different from what people are used to. When people have thought and behaved in one way their whole life, and that's all they know, it's hard to change. Faith in Christ the Light means following a new and different path. New things can be scary. Ask any church member, "How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb?" and the most likely answer you'll get is, "Change?!"

You would think that if your old beliefs and way of life mean misery and no hope for a better future, that you would be highly motivated to change. It's not very bright to want to stay with them, but the devil we know is often preferred over the devil we don't know, that is, the unknown.

Speaking of bright, bright is another way of describing the light of God. People who reject the Light live in the death and darkness of sin. The Bible says:

"And this is the condemnation, that light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19).

Have you ever noticed that crime seems to happen most often in the dark? Theft and murder happen in dark places. Adultery happens in secrecy. Unscrupulous politicians try to be in the "limelight" for the good things they do, but then they work overtime to "cover up" the bad things they do.

Jesus is the Light of God who offers forgiveness and eternal life to all who repent and receive him by faith. But repentance means turning from the darkness, putting away sin and every evil and doing things God's way. And many people aren't too keen on the repentance part. They want forgiveness and eternal life, but not so much that they change their lives. So they remain in the dark. But who knows when the Holy Spirit will strike a spark of faith in their hearts?

As I indicated earlier, one of the things we associate with baptism is that God is light and he sent us his Son to be the Light of the world. Jesus is not light like a flashlight gives off. He is the light in a different way.

Sometimes we speak of light such as the light of a flashlight or a ceiling fixture. That kind of light is important because it helps us find our way in the dark or pick up something we dropped.

Sometimes light means that we understand something. When we finally figure something out, like how to solve a math problem, we say it's like a lightbulb goes off in our head.

But Jesus is light in a different way. Jesus is the light of righteousness. Our sins are like darkness, and we are lost in that darkness. Through the light of Jesus our sins are forgiven. His light shines the way to heaven. His light shows us how to live in a God-pleasing way.

Can a flashlight show you how to have your sins forgiven or shine the way to heaven or help you see how to follow Jesus? Of course, not. A flashlight can't do that. But Jesus can because Jesus shows us God and a life that really matters.

When you trust in Jesus, the Light, then you shine with his light. People see Jesus in you and are drawn to the light. Remembering your baptism conveys this and so much more.

Many Churches provide a candle for a person being baptized, or the parents of the one being baptized. It can serve as a reminder of the blessed day. Some people light this candle for a few minutes on the anniversary of the baptism. Others might light the candle again to mark other significant moments in the person's life, such as confirmation, graduation, and marriage.

While baptism candles are not necessarily part of the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition we are among those who strongly emphasize the renewal of baptism. And since the specific aspect of baptism we are stressing today is the symbol of light, we decided to offer votive candles as a token of this experience. Then on the anniversary of your baptism (if you know it – most don't) or for Baptism for the Lord or any time you want to remember and renew the meaning of your baptism, light the candle and use the pray printed on the back of the bookmark in your bulletin. Remember your baptism and be thankful.

Jesus sums it up this way:

You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven (Mt 5:14-16 MSG).

ADDENDUM:

PRAYER FOR REMEMBRANCE OF BAPTISM

Eternal and gracious God, we give you thanks. In countless ways you have revealed yourself in ages past and have blessed us with signs of your grace.

We praise you that through the waters of the sea you led your people Israel out of bondage into freedom in the land of your promise.

We praise you for sending Jesus, your Son, who for us was baptized in the waters of the Jordan and was anointed as the Christ by your Holy Spirit. Through the baptism of his death and resurrection you set us free from the bondage of sin and death and give us cleansing and rebirth.

We praise you for your Holy Spirit, who teaches us and leads us into all truth, filling us with a variety of gifts, that we might proclaim the gospel to all nations and serve you as a royal priesthood.

We rejoice that you claimed us in our baptism and that by your grace we are born anew. By your Holy Spirit renew us, that we may be empowered to do your will and continue forever in the risen life of Christ, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be all glory and honor, now and forever.
Amen.