



LET YOUR LIFE SHOW THE LIGHT

Preached by
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"... and they perceived he had seen a vision in the temple." - Luke 1:22

How do you look when you leave church? It is very interesting to watch people as they leave a Sunday morning service. Some are in a hurry. They try to get out just as rapidly as possible. The roast may be burning, or perhaps a husband is burning because his dinner is not ready. Some are occupied with their families. The children are tired, there are coats that are not buttoned and scarfs that are flying in the wind. Some are talking, laughing, waving to their friends. Some are worried - they brought worries to church and now they are taking the same worries home again. Some look a little angry. A few look sad. But by and large, a group of people coming out of a church look exactly like a group of people coming out of any other kind of a meeting.

In the first chapter of Luke, we have a description of a man who looked different. "... and they perceived he had seen a vision in the temple." They tried to talk to him; but he could not, or would not, answer. He walked as a man in a daze. This man was Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. Priests were at liberty to live anywhere in Judea when they were not on duty. At the time of this story the priests were divided into twenty-four divisions. Each of these divisions was responsible for the conduct of temple worship for one week at semi-annual intervals. But there were so many priests that the privilege of performing any significant act in the process of worship was assigned by lot. It might happen that only once in a lifetime a priest would receive such an assignment.

"It is probably the evening of the Sabbath - the presence of the multitude would almost imply that - and this evening the lot gave to Zachariah the covet-

ed distinction of burning incense in the Holy Place. At a given signal, between the laying and the offering of the lamb, Zachariah, barefooted and robed in white, passes up the steps, accompanied by two assistants, one bearing a golden censer containing half a pound of the sweet-smelling incense, the other bearing a golden vessel of burning coals taken from the altar. Slowly and reverently they pass within the Holy Place, which none but Levites are permitted to enter; and having arranged the incense and spread the live coals upon the altar, the assistants retire; leaving Zachariah alone - alone in the dim light of the seven-branched candlestick, alone beside the veil he may not uplift and which hides from his sight the Holy of Holies. Such is the place, and such the supreme moment, when Heaven breaks the silence of four hundred years." (Expositors Bible "Luke" p. 22)

Evelyn Underhill, the great writer on mysticism says: "form may smother spirit, ritual action take the place of spontaneous prayer, the outward and visible sign obscure the inward grace." That had been happening at this place for centuries. That continues to happen wherever we worship. It appalls me the way some people casually approach a service of worship. Even worse is the casual way some people prepare to lead a service of worship. It seems to me that it was in no such casual way that Zachariah entered the sanctuary. For it was here that God spoke to him; it was here that his life was changed.

Outside the other priests were in their places, grouped together on the steps leading up to the Holy Place. The sacrificing priest has ascended the great brazen altar. . . the Levites stand ready with their trumpets - all are waiting, but Zachariah does not appear. The Talmud states that the priests were accustomed to return as soon as possible to prevent anxiety, for it was feared that in so sacred a place they might

displease God and be killed. Everyone is as restless as a congregation which finds the minister has gone beyond the hour of closing. When Zachariah does appear he is speechless and so disturbed that he cannot finish his service. "And they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple." Luke tells us that he had learned that he was to be the father of a son who would make ready the way for the Messiah. After the son was born, Zachariah spoke the words of our Scripture Lesson. At least, these words are attributed to him - the words of the Benedictus which have become one of the great hymns or chants of the church. . . "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people. . . and you, child, will be the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Thus it was the task of this son of the man, who saw a vision as he worshipped, to prepare the way. He preached a message of repentance. In this ~~last~~ season we are called to repentance to prepare again the way for the coming of the Messiah. When you leave the church today your life must show the light.

The other night a group of us were talking about the need for a sign on our church. At the present time it is a major project to discover what sort of church this is. At least, people know it is a church, but we hope that some day as people go up and down Lark Street they will be able to see at a glance that it is Trinity Methodist Church. We ought to be proud of it. In the course of the discussion about this sign, there was a suggestion about the need to have it lighted. Someone said, "Why not paint it with some of this new reflecting paint, then we shall not have to light it, we shall make use of the street lights." I've been thinking about that. At least, I have been

thinking about that. I have been thinking about the symbolism it suggests. There are so many churches that simply reflect the light of their own time. Such a sign would be dark in itself. It would be lighted only by a passing auto or when the street lights came on. I do not want to belabour this, but I simply want to stress that the light which the Christian shows is not a reflection of his culture.

As a matter of fact, the light which we show is quite independent of our own time. It is an eternal light. I once did some amateur wiring. My wife wanted a bell on the back door. She went out one day and I went to work to give her the bell. I did all the work, went out to the back door and tested it and was proud. It rang. She came home and I said, "Go around to the back door." She went, pressed the button, and it didn't ring! I said, "That is strange, let me go and look." So I turned on the cellar lights, investigated, and found that everything was all right. I called upstairs, "Try it now." She did. It rang! So I turned out the lights, went upstairs and said, "I told you so." Just to prove it, I went out and pressed the button again. It didn't ring. You have guessed it. I had connected the bell in such a way that it was necessary to have the cellar lights on for it to ring. It worked all right- someone would knock on the door, we would turn on the cellar lights and shout, "Press the button!" So often people depend upon some such secondary source of power for their lives. The message of Advent is that there is only one source of power and that is Jesus Christ. There is only one source of light, Jesus Christ. The hymn has it:-

"Ask ye what great thing I know
That delights and stirs me so?
What the high reward I win?
Whose the Name I glory in?
Jesus Christ, the Crucified.

Who defeats my fiercest foes? Who consoles my saddest woes? Who revives my fainting heart? Healing all its hidden smart? Jesus Christ, the Crucified.

In these days there are ceremonies when the Christmas lights are turned on. The mayor, or some other notable person, pushes the button. How wrong we are! No one turns on the Christmas lights but God. The Christmas lights turned on by men are sometimes pretty, but never beautiful or lasting. Sooner or later they will be turned off. God alone is the eternal light, the light which lighteth every life. Such light does not depend upon our moods, upon our ability, even upon our worthiness, but it does shine on our need. This morning, I am trying to say that Christians must first find this light and then we must let our lives show this light.

I think there are three ways in which we can do this. The first is in our response to human need. There are many people who simply cannot pass a beggar on the street and yet are singularly blind to real human need. A vast gulf separates the sentimental quarter, which we give to salve our conscience, from the life that is sensitive to the needs of persons; sometimes persons we cannot see. I once knew a man who was singularly touched by Dickens' Christmas Carol. He distributed copies of it freely. Yet that man could see no connection between the sins of Scrooge and his own hardness of heart during the eleven months from December 31 to December 1. There is such vast need in our world today. Some of this need can be met by our gifts, but much of it needs to be met by love and our concern. This is one reason why your ministers believe that our people should be concerned about the continuance of the Child Guidance Center in our community. Through this Center we can help meet human need. The Center is going to be closed unless the people of the community are aroused.

Incidentally, this is only a symptom of something that goes deep into the political and social life of Albany. I know of no better way to let your life show the light than by going home and writing a letter to the Supervisors telling how you feel. This response to human need is not something otherworldly, it involves letter writing and practical politics. Frankly, a letter to the proper persons for such a community need will do more good than all the Christmas cards we ever send. I have used this one issue as an illustration. You extend the principle for yourself to other areas of life.

The second way by which we can let our lives show the light is to take the initiative in goodwill. In Overstreet's book, "The Mind Goes Forth," a considerable amount of space is devoted to this subject. We read: "One of the most dramatic and creative arts that we human beings are privileged to practice is that of learning how and when to take the initiative in goodwill; and one of the most stringent tests by which personality can be measured is its courage and skill in trying to resolve conflicts that threaten to assume the proportions of conflict unlimited." There is a certain amount of risk here and we may expect that our initiative will many times be rebuffed. Sometimes this will be caused by our own clumsiness, sometimes because we have not developed enough skill in human relations. But on the whole the person who lets his life show the light through goodwill will find satisfaction in his life. Most of us approach life defensively, because we think that it is necessary to protect ourselves. Some of us approach life aggressively, because we think that it is necessary to get our own way. Too few of us use Christ's approach, which is that of goodwill.

This all becomes either sentimental or academic.

I recall a Christmas pageant that was given by the children's division of a church where I was the minister. It consisted of tableaux portraying the Nativity story. In one of these the shepherds were shown out in the field. They were boys from the primary department, and made a lovely picture. Except that right in the middle of the hymn, "While shepherds watched their flocks by night," an argument developed between two shepherds and eventually all were involved and the scene ended in a free-for-all, during which the shepherd's crooks were used as quarter staves and only the intervention of the Sunday School Superintendent saved us from disaster. How often our Christmas ends that way! It ends that way because we put on a costume for a few days rather than letting the eternal light shine through our lives in creative goodwill. This does not happen automatically, nor does it happen without effort. The one who gave us the teaching found that it led him to a cross, but because of that cross it has become a live option for us. Try to let your life show the light by taking the initiative in goodwill.

The third way is a little hard to express. Perhaps I can illustrate it for you. Look at these windows. I call your attention to the varied personalities and activities that are portrayed. These windows would not be so beautiful were it not for their variety and were it not for the color which is in each individual window. But, granted all of this, there is still one other thing that is absolutely necessary to make our windows live. That is light. Take away the light and all the skill of the artist is lost. I'll go a step further with my parable and point out that if we make it light enough inside we can erase all the beauty. Sometimes we feel so self-sufficient, sometimes we feel so strong, sometimes we feel so wise that people see in us a black or blank wall. But when we turn from our own sufficiency to the light

of Christ and let that shine through us - then our lives may become like these windows. We are not all alike. We are doing different things. We are different people. But the light that illumines us is the same light. Now and then windows get dirty and they must be cleaned. Now and then we do things we ought not to do and we must repent and our lives must be cleansed. But the light is always there ready to shine through our talents, through our abilities, through out personalities.

"Fair is the sunshine,
Fairer still the moonlight,
And all the twinkling starry host;
Jesus shines brighter, Jesus shines purer
Than all the angels heaven can boast."

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