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Light of the World

BY REV. CHUCK MIZE

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life. --John 8:12b

In the Gospel of John, Jesus makes seven identity statements...statements about who He is. These are the I am statements. In the original Greek of the New Testament, I am is Ego eimi. Ego is exactly what we think it is. Its sole focus is on I or me, and eimi means I am. Put them together and the statement is emphatic in its emphasis: literally I I am, or I really am!

The seven I am statements of Jesus in John are I am...the bread of life...the light of the world...the door...the good shepherd...the resurrection and the life...the way the truth and the life...the true vine. Many biblical scholars agree that Jesus never actually said these words. Instead, they tell us that the I am statements were doctrinal confessions about Jesus in the early church. To give them emphasis and status, John wrote them into his gospel and put them on Jesus' own lips. We may disagree about whether Jesus actually spoke these words, but we can all agree that the I am statements are statements of faith about our Lord and Savior.

The second I am statement – I am the light of the world – doesn't refer to natural sunshine or the artificial illumination of electricity or flame that floods our eyes and warms our faces. It refers to the illumination of perspective, understanding, and love that expands our minds and floods our hearts with the truth of Jesus. Jesus is the light of the world who shows us who we really are, and who God intends us to become.

At Union Church in Green Bay, two of the stained-glass windows wrap the sixth I am statement as a halo banner around a candle, but with a glaring error. Instead of I am the way the truth and the life, those banners read I am the way the truth and the light. Whether that misquote was intentional or accidental I don't know. But it isn't wrong. In a significant sense, the way, the truth, the life, and the light are all synonyms for who Jesus is. And remember, this misquote is ensconced in stained glass that requires light to transform its inky lifelessness into vivid beauty and brilliance. There is no power in stained-glass without light. (cont. p 2)

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Light of the World cont.

It's the same for us. Without the illumination of the light of the world – Jesus – our lives are inky pools of lifelessness. But, when Jesus' love dispels our clouds of doubt, distress, and despair, we become shining beacons of hope, healing, and renewal today.

There's a story about a pastor who was leading the Children's Moments in Sunday worship. His topic was saints, and he began by asking his congregation of kids what a saint is. One girl waved her hand excitedly. When the pastor called on her, she pointed up at a figure in the stained-glass window and said: A saint is someone who the light shines through!

I love stained glass. And, even though our windows portray symbols instead of saints, what a joy it is to be bathed in the light of Southminster's stained glass each Sunday! One of the miracles of the fire at Notre Dame is that most of its incredible stained glass was spared. It is the grandest church in Paris, and in the world. But the most magnificent Parisian church of light is diminutive in comparison. Sainte-Chapelle is a chapel within the judicial center. But no church in the world has a higher percentage of stained-glass ...and light...than does Sainte-Chapelle. With so much glass and so little stone knitting it together and holding it up, the walls seem to defy gravity. It feels like pure light.

Those misquotes in the windows at Union Church in Green Bay are wiser than they may seem. Yes, Jesus is our way, our truth...and our light! So, my friends, in this season of light that reveals and inspires, may we invite God to shine the light through us, so that everyone we meet sees Christ, only and always, living in you and me!

When I am Among The Trees

BY MARY OLIVER

When I am among the trees,
especially the willows and the honey locust,
equally the beech, the oaks and the pines,
they give off such hints of gladness.
I would almost say that they save me, and daily.

I am so distant from the hope of myself,
in which I have goodness, and discernment,
and never hurry through the world
but walk slowly, and bow often.

Around me the trees stir in their leaves
and call out, "Stay awhile."
The light flows from their branches.

And they call again, "It's simple," they say,
"and you too have come
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled
with light, and to shine."

"We are stars
wrapped in skin.
The light you are
seeking has
always been
within"

~ Rumi





Fourth and Walnut Epiphany

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream....

This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud...It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race, though it is a race dedicated to many absurdities and one which makes many terrible mistakes: yet, with all that, God Himself gloried in becoming a member of the human race. A member of the human race! To think that such a commonplace realization should suddenly seem like news that one holds the winning ticket in a cosmic sweepstakes. I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now that I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun...

Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed...

At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us in our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependents, as our sonship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely...I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.

Excerpts from Thomas Merton "Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander", Crown Publishing Group 1966, pp 153 – 154.

One Strong Star

BY JOYCE RUPP

I stand gazing at the cold winter sky,
thirty minutes after midnight
on the first day of the new year.
What I see catches my heart
and draws me into profound hope.

There in the black winter sky
one strong star sings a silent melody,
illuminating the heavily clouded heights
with a powerful, assuring presence.
I hear it calling to every human soul
whose life yearns for something more.

One strong star sends a brave song
to those who doubt their own courage.
It shines for the soreness of the planet
and for all who die daily
in their coffins of discouragement.

I stand gazing at that single star
resonating with the shining message:
none of us need doubt our ability to survive.

Hope comes in little ways –
it only takes one shining star,
one faithful friend,
one wisp of inspiration,
one touch of creation's beauty,
one deep sip of love
to keep the illumination alive in us.

In the snow laden clouds of the first day
of the new year
I bow to the heavens and turn homeward
grateful for the quiet in my heart,
and for the singing of a lone star sending strength
to every corner of the cosmos.





The Light Within

Deep within us all there is an amazing inner sanctuary of the soul, a holy place, a Divine Center, a speaking Voice, to which we may continually return. Eternity is at our hearts, pressing upon our time-torn lives, warming us with intimations of an astounding destiny, calling us home unto Itself. Yielding to these persuasions, gladly committing ourselves in body and soul, utterly and completely, to the Light Within, is the beginning of true life. It is a dynamic center, a creative Life that presses to birth within us. It is a Light Within that illumines the face of God and casts new shadows and new glories upon the human face. It is a seed stirring to life if we do not choke it. It is the Shekinah of the soul, the Presence in the midst. Here is the Slumbering Christ, stirring to be awakened, to become the soul we clothe in earthly form and action. And Christ is within us all.

You who read these words already know this inner Life and Light. For by this very Light within you is your recognition given. In this humanistic age we suppose we are the initiators and God is the responder. But the Living Christ within us is the initiator, and we are the responders. . . .

The basic response of the soul to the Light is internal adoration and joy, thanksgiving and worship, self-surrender and listening. The secret places of the heart cease to be our noisy workshop. They become a holy sanctuary of adoration and of self-oblation, where we are kept in perfect peace, if our minds be stayed on [God] who has found us in the inward springs of our life. . . . Powerfully are the springs of our will moved to an abandon of singing love toward God; powerfully are we moved to a new and overcoming love toward time-blinded human beings and all creation. In this Center of Creation all things are ours, and we are Christ's and Christ is God's.

Thomas R. Kelly, A Testament of Devotion (HarperSanFrancisco: 1992, ©1941), 9–10, 11.

I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light

HYMN BY KATHLEEN THOMERSON

I want to walk as a child of the light.
I want to follow Jesus.
God set the stars to give light to the world.
The star of my life is Jesus.

In him there is no darkness at all.
The night and the day are both alike.
The Lamb is the light of the city of God.
Shine in my heart, Lord Jesus.

I want to see the brightness of God.
I want to look at Jesus.
Clear sun of righteousness, shine on my path,
and show me the way to the Father.

“You are the light of the world...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

- Matthew 5:14, 16

