

## Light in the Darkness: Mighty God

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Last week, Pastor Layne kicked off our Advent series, “Light in the Darkness.” Darkness is an interesting thing, isn’t it? On one hand, we may welcome darkness because it allows us to hide, allows us to not really have to show what is really going on. On the other hand, though, we may fear it because we can’t see what is happening around us.

Darkness is defined as the partial or total absence of light.

In late June 2018, 12 teen members of a local Thai soccer team and their coach biked into the foothills. Exploring the forests and caves after a soccer practice was their favorite thing to do. They had great fun in one cave especially, sometimes venturing into it some five miles. There they often performed an initiation rite: scrawling the names of new team members on the cave wall.

The cave system posed dangers; people had gotten lost in it and even died. It is especially dangerous in the monsoon season when rains come. But the boys knew the cave system well and safely played there often.

On this particular June day, the team had walked into the cave maybe two and a half miles. They were unaware that while they were there it had started to rain. In fact, it was a heavy, relentless downpour. The waters inside the cave rose, and the cave flooded. The soccer team found refuge on a narrow shelf of rock. There they were stranded, trapped, and in complete darkness. They had flashlights but had to use them sparingly, and as their ordeal continued for days, they ran out of battery power.

What must it have been like to be stranded in darkness—lost, terrified, without hope?

In many ways, we’re all just like those boys. Since the day in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve ate the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden to today, December 4, 2022, we live in a dark world.

There are many historical and organized patterns of mistreatment that are woven into cultures, societies, and laws around the world. A society’s institutions, such as

government, education, and culture, all contribute or reinforce the oppression of marginalized social groups while elevating dominant social groups. There is economic, racial, and gender oppression throughout history, including during and after the time of Jesus. The social condition of women in the first century had been radically altered from that of their ancient sisters.

In ancient Israel, women participated in every aspect of community life except in the Temple priesthood. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, we read that women freely engaged in commerce and real estate (Proverbs 31), as well as in manual labor (Exodus 35:25, Ruth 2:7, 1 Samuel 8:13). They were not excluded from Temple worship. Women played music in the sanctuary (Psalm 68:25), prayed there (1 Samuel 1:12), sang and danced with men in religious processions (2 Samuel 6:19, 22), and participated in music and festivities at weddings (Song of Solomon 2:7, 3:11).

Women were not limited to private roles during those centuries. Several exercised leadership roles over Israel. Miriam, the sister of Moses, led the women of Israel in worship (Exodus 15:20–21), Deborah was a judge and a prophetess (Judges 4:4), and the scriptures specifically mention that she was a wife and mother as well.

Abigail is recognized for her ability to navigate a politically tense conflict between King David and her husband, Nabal. Her wisdom and valor so touched King David that she became his wife after Nabal's death (1 Samuel 25:23–42). Many more sharp and gifted women found their ways into the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures and are still honored today.

By the time of Jesus, the role of women had drastically changed for the worse. In theory, women were held in high regard by first-century Jewish society, but in practice, this was not always true. While a man's primary responsibility was seen as public, a woman's life was confined almost entirely within the private family sphere.

Customarily, even a woman of stature could not engage in commerce and would rarely be seen outside her home. Only a woman in dire economic straits, who was forced to become the family breadwinner, could engage in her own small trade. If a woman was ever in the streets, she was to be heavily veiled and was prohibited from conversing with men. The women of the first century did not even do their own

shopping, except possibly to go out, accompanied by a slave, to buy material which they would use to construct their own clothing at home!

The women recounted in the New Testament were very likely illiterate, since the rabbis did not consider it incumbent upon women to learn to read in order to study the Scriptures. The rabbis declared women to be exempt from the commandment to learn the Law of Moses.

Women were separated from men in private, public, and religious life. They could go to the Temple but could not venture beyond the confines of the Women's Court. There was no such court found in the original descriptions of Solomon's Temple, so we know it was added later. Women were not allowed to participate in public prayer at the Temple, although they were encouraged to have private prayer lives at home.

What brought about this drastic change from the esteem women had in the times of the Hebrew Scriptures to their near exclusion from society by the era of the New Testament? Very likely, this degraded view of a woman's role was imported from Greek thought. The similarities between the Greeks and the body of Jewish civil/ceremonial law and views of women are remarkable. Through the influence of their Greek neighbors, the rabbis slowly relegated women to their first-century seclusion. These gender norms were not based on the Jewish culture but on Greek and Roman household codes that were widespread throughout their empires and occupied lands.

The world was dark. As dark as the cave that the Thai soccer team found themselves stuck in. Their bikes were found outside the mouth of the Tham Luang cave, and families feared the worst. Rescue was not a simple matter: the waters were still rising, their currents strong. The path into the cave was a treacherous labyrinth for the divers to navigate. One plan was to pump water out of the cave, but that would be a mammoth operation. Trapped inside, the soccer team lived in darkness for what must have felt like many lifetimes.

The attention of the whole world pivoted to the fate of the boys. International assistance was offered, and an elite rescue team was formed. A plan emerged to pump out as much water as possible to allow Navy SEAL divers deeper access into the cave before having to go underwater.

Then, some nine days after the boys had entered the cave, they saw a light. A diver's head bobbed up from the water, his flashlight shining a glow around the boys huddled together, cold but now bearing hopeful faces. A flicker of light from a diver's head was enough to give the Thai soccer team hope that they may be rescued. They would have to remain in the cave on the rock ledge for nine more days, but all 12 boys and their coach were rescued.

All it takes is just a little bit of light. Just a flicker brings hope. It allows us to see just enough. We may not be able to see far ahead and know what will come next, but a glimmer of light is enough to fill our souls with hope and bring us comfort.

One night more than 2,000 years ago, Christ was born, emerging from the dark waters of history and shining into the world a glowing circle of hope.

For 1<sup>st</sup> century women maybe, just maybe a space would be created for them to grow, to be transformed, to lead.

John 1:4-5 says, "In him, *In Jesus*, was life, and that life was the light of all humankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9:6)

Mighty God. What a paradox that a baby in a manger should be called Mighty! Yet even as a baby, Jesus Christ was the center of power. His birth affected the heavens and caused a dazzling star to appear. The star aroused the interest of the Magi, and they left their homes and made a long and dangerous journey to Jerusalem. Their announcement about the newborn King unnerved Herod, who was the king of Judea, appointed by the Roman government. Jesus' birth brought angels from heaven to simple shepherds, who were out in the field, keeping watch over their flocks. Midnight became midday as the glory of the Lord appeared to them.

Mighty in this context does mean power and strength, but it also means a hero, a warrior. What a statement! Isaiah, this 7th century BC prophet, anticipated what the New Testament would ultimately confirm. The Messiah, Jesus, would be God. He would have God's power—but to Isaiah the amazing thing was that the Messiah would not only have the power of God, He would **be** the God of power!

The New Testament provides us an opportunity to see the fullness of the “Mighty God” Isaiah predicted, showing how Jesus’ life-changing might and power was displayed on earth.

There is no better example of Mighty God than how Jesus interacted with women. Jesus treated women as equals with the respect and love deserved by image bearers of God. He was a revolutionary in His regard for women. He was not afraid to challenge the status quo and reexamine the traditional ways Scripture had been interpreted.

By publicly including women in His ministry, Jesus shattered the harmful customs of His day. The light of Jesus pierced the darkness by offering His teachings freely to anyone with ears to listen—whether they were Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female! We see Him directly talking with women on numerous occasions. The woman at the well is perhaps the best known of these.

I am going to read selected verses of this account from John 4.

<sup>1</sup> Now Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John. <sup>3</sup> So he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee.

<sup>4</sup> Now he had to go through Samaria. <sup>5</sup> So he came to a town in Samaria [where Jacob’s well was], <sup>6</sup> ... and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well.

<sup>7</sup> When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?”

<sup>9</sup> The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

<sup>10</sup> Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”

<sup>11</sup> “Sir,” the woman said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? <sup>12</sup> Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?”

<sup>13</sup> Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, <sup>14</sup> but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

<sup>15</sup> The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.”

<sup>16</sup> He told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.”

<sup>17</sup> “I have no husband,” she replied. Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. <sup>18</sup> The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.”

<sup>19</sup> “Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. <sup>20</sup> Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.”

<sup>21</sup> “Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. <sup>22</sup> You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. <sup>23</sup> Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. <sup>24</sup> God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”

<sup>25</sup> The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”

<sup>26</sup> Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.”

<sup>27</sup> Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, “What do you want?” or “Why are you talking with her?”

<sup>28</sup> Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, <sup>29</sup> “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?” <sup>30</sup> They came out of the town and made their way toward him.

<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile his disciples urged him, “Rabbi, eat something.”

<sup>32</sup> But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about.”

<sup>33</sup> Then his disciples said to each other, “Could someone have brought him food?”

<sup>34</sup> “My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. <sup>35</sup> Don’t you have a saying, ‘It’s still four months until harvest’? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.

<sup>39</sup> Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I ever did.” <sup>40</sup> So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. <sup>41</sup> And because of his words many more became believers.

<sup>42</sup> They said to the woman, “We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world.”

This in-depth account about Jesus and the Samaritan Woman at the well is highly significant for understanding Jesus in several relationships: Samaritans, women, and sinners. By talking openly with this woman, Jesus crossed a number of barriers, which normally would have separated a Jewish teacher from such a person as this woman of Samaria. Jesus did three things that were highly unconventional and astonishing for his cultural-religious situation:

1. He, as a man, discussed theology openly with a woman.
2. He, as a Jew, asked to drink from the ritually unclean bucket of a Samaritan.
3. He did not avoid her, even though he knew her marital record of having had five former husbands and was now living with a man who was not her husband.

The disciples showed their astonishment upon their return to the well: "They were marveling that He was talking with a woman. A man in the Jewish world did not normally talk with a woman in public, not even with his own wife. For a rabbi to discuss theology with a woman was even more unconventional.

Jesus did not hesitate to ask of the woman that she let Him drink from her vessel, but He also did not hesitate to offer her a drink of another kind from a Jewish bucket as

He said to her, "Salvation is from the Jews." Salvation was coming to the Samaritan woman from the Jews, and culturally there was great hostility between the Jews and the Samaritans, as the Samaritans were considered a half-breed race by the Jews.

Pope John Paul II describes this account this way:

"This is an event without precedent: that a woman, and what is more a sinful woman, becomes a disciple of Christ. Indeed, once taught, she proclaims Christ to the inhabitants of Samaria so that they too receive him with faith. This is an unprecedented event, if one remembers the usual way women were treated by those who were teachers in Israel; whereas in Jesus of Nazareth's way of acting such an event becomes normal."

The key to Jesus' stance is found in His perceiving people as people. He saw the stranger at the well as someone who first and foremost was a person—not primarily a Samaritan, a woman, or a sinner. She was a person created in the image of God.

This evangelized woman became an evangelist. She introduced her community to a man whom they came to acclaim as "the Savior of the world." Jesus liberated this woman and awakened her to a new life in which not only did she receive but also gave. In verse 39, it says she brought "many Samaritans" to faith in Christ. This woman became an evangelist.

Another paradigm-breaking moment is found in the story of Jesus and His disciples at the home of the sisters Mary and Martha found in Luke 10. Mary, mesmerized by Jesus' teaching, is caught by her sister Martha sitting and listening to Jesus' teaching with the male disciples. This could have been quite a social embarrassment to the family. The role of women was to serve the family and support the education of the men, and Martha became very angry at Rabbi Jesus for not enforcing the norms by telling Mary to go help.

But Jesus passionately defends Mary's choice to sit and listen. In doing so, He counter-culturally affirms women's roles as fully fledged disciples and implicitly invites Martha to join her sister among the disciples.

In several other places in Luke's gospel, we see Jesus publicly associating with women. Some were women of high standing in society, some were women of ill repute,

and some even had been possessed by demons. One of these—Mary Magdalene, who in great thankfulness was with Him until the moment He died—was the first person to whom He appeared after His resurrection.

Time after time in the eyewitness accounts of Jesus' life, we see Him offering His teachings, healing, and forgiveness to women as well as men. It was only fitting that Jesus our Messiah, in His love, shattered the darkness, the restricted status of women in the times in which He lived. Because of Him, all individuals, women and men, Jews and Gentiles, and Samaritans, the wealthy and the poor, the religious and the sinners are one and can enjoy unequalled freedom as children of God.

Jesus said in John 8:12, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." To meet Jesus was to have the darkness in your life shot through with the most exquisite light. On that day when a Samaritan woman encountered Jesus, encountered His light, everything changed for her and everyone else in her community.

This woman first had to receive in order to give. For maybe the first time in her life, she was truly seen. Jesus saw past her gender, He saw past her ethnic background, He saw past all of her flaws and simply loved her. She belonged! She belonged to something so much bigger than she had ever belonged to before, the Kingdom of God. She was transformed, and her transformation led to others being transformed too.

To meet Jesus was to have the darkness in your life shot through with the most exquisite light. It didn't necessarily mean all the Samaritan woman's problems were solved, but it did mean darkness lost its power over her. Oppression lost its power over her.

Jesus, our Mighty God, had remarkable encounters with both women and men. Light was cracking open dark, locked-down corners where shame, isolation, fear, oppression, despair, and hopelessness had taken hold.

Matthew 5:14 and 16 says, "You are the light of the world... <sup>16</sup> In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." We, too, are the light of the world. It is one of the few names we share with Jesus Himself.

This Samaritan woman let her light shine, let the light of Jesus that she had just experienced and received shine. In verse 39, we read that “many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony.” Because Jesus chose to cross barriers, gender barriers, ethnic and religious barriers and actually see people as people, lives were changed. A woman, a group of people found belonging. Light pierced the darkness.

When we experience and receive Jesus’ love for us, light comes in, and we can’t help but shine that light to the world. We get to banish darkness wherever we find it: in our neighborhoods, at work or school.

So how do we do that, banish darkness? We do what Jesus did at the well with the Samaritan woman.

- Let’s sit and listen to the stories of the oppressed.
- Let’s love so lavishly that no one feels ignored or isolated by shame.
- And let’s stand and provide a place of sanctuary from the world to the oppressed.

These might seem like little things—insignificant things, even—in such a dark world. But... Remember the story of the Thai soccer team. All it takes is a flicker to bring hope, to bring comfort in the midst of darkness.

Remember the darkness that surrounded us earlier in this service—but then one lantern came in, then another, and another, and we could see just enough that our hearts were filled with hope, with trust, with faith. All it takes is a flicker of light, the light of Jesus, to pierce the darkness.

I challenge you to sit with these questions:

- Where does God want to shine His light into the darkness of my oppression?
- Where is God asking me to shine my light in this dark world?

You may feel like the Samaritan woman. You are in a season of darkness, of oppression, and you desperately need Jesus, the light of the world, to pierce that darkness. Friends, He longs to do just that this morning. There is belonging in the Kingdom of God. Even the smallest flicker can bring you hope. Look, experience, and see the flicker from Jesus, the light of the world.

You may sense that you haven't been shining your light in this world. Maybe since the pandemic, you have felt stuck, unsure of how to engage in an increasingly dark world. Remember: all it takes is a flicker of light. Listen as God speaks to you about how you can use your gifts, words, and love to illuminate hope to the hopeless and faith to the faithless. Here at McBIC, we have many missional communities that you can connect with and be a part of. Anyone on staff would love to share more with you.

Jesus, our Emmanuel, is with us. The light of the world is here. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not *and will never* overcome it." (John 1:5)