

December 18, 2016
Rick Myatt

KIND OF LIKE MORDOR John 1:4-5

Laurie and I were at a mall in the town of Lihue on the island of Kauai one night years ago. There was a band playing a concert in the center of the mall. We had just begun listening when all of a sudden everything went dark and we could no longer hear the band. The power had gone out. We sat there for a few minutes, hoping like everyone else there that the power would come back on. But it soon became apparent that it might be some time before that happened so we decided to leave. However, we were in an unfamiliar mall in total darkness. Laurie opened up her cell phone and we used the light from its screen to find our way out of the mall without running into any obstacles hiding in the dark. When we got out to our car we could see it wasn't just the mall that had lost power. The entire area was blacked out. We got in our car and drove back toward our hotel, very carefully since there were no street lights, traffic signals or lit street signs. When we arrived we immediately could see that things were no better at our hotel as it was also without power. We sat out by the pool for a bit, but it was totally dark and that wasn't much fun, so we headed back to our room. We immediately realized that was no improvement, because our room was also completely dark. There was only one refuge for us. The hallways of the hotel had emergency lighting that was working. So again using the cell phone we managed to find a couple of books that we had in our room, then took them out to the hall and sat on the floor reading.

The entire island had experienced a power outage. We never could learn why. There was no explanation that we heard and when we asked the locals about it they just said, "It just happens every now and then." I was reminded that light is a big deal. If you've ever been in a place where there is a total absence of light you know it is not pleasant. When I was a kid our family went on a tour of Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico. That is a complex of 21 miles of caves, but the tour only takes you through about 3 miles. However, at one point deep in that cave they turn off all the lights they have that guide the tourists. It was absolute pitch black. I could almost feel the dark. The minute they left the lights off was more than enough. An absence of light is an awful thing. Today we are going to think about light. Let's look at John 1:4-5.

WE LIVE IN A DARK WORLD

This passage asserts that Jesus is the source of life and that the life he produces is light shining in darkness. This is consistent with what Matthew said when Jesus

began his public ministry in the area around the Sea of Galilee. He quoted Isaiah 9:2 in Matthew 4:19, “The people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”

First we should notice that both of the gospel writers claimed that people were living in darkness. The Bible claims that this is indeed a dark world. In J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy there was a dark land called Mordor, ruled over by the powerful and evil lord Sauron. Tolkien depicted it as a barren place, a blasted landscape of polluted swamps and tortured, treeless plains and mountains, existing in gloom as it is perpetually covered by clouds and smoke. Listen to his vivid description. “The gasping pools were choked with ash and crawling muds, sickly white and grey, as if the mountains had vomited the filth of their entrails upon the lands about. High mounds of crushed and powdered rock, great cones of earth fire-blasted and poison-stained, stood like an obscene graveyard in endless rows, slowly revealed in the reluctant light... Mists curled and smoked from dark and noisome pools. The reek of them hung stifling in the still air.”

Well that’s not the world we live in physically. We live in a place of beauty and sunshine, right? But the point the Bible is making is not that this earth is a physically dark and ugly place, but that the human environment is dark. Tolkien’s description was a physical representation of the inevitable effects of evil and of spiritual darkness.

In the context of Isaiah the darkness consisted of a people that had lost their way. They were called to be the people of God, but they had wandered from him and had begun to worship other gods and to live in disobedience to him. They had lost his truth, and in so doing they became sources of darkness themselves. They had become worthy of judgment, and that judgment was looming. A powerful enemy, Assyria, the super power of Isaiah’s day, was threatening, and Isaiah warned them that the judgment was going to come. And it was going to be awful. The near future for Israel was dark indeed.

By the time of Jesus the situation had changed. Yet the people were still living in darkness. The darkness consisted of the weariness and hopelessness of being ruled by Rome, living under the harshness of that regime. But it also contained a significant amount of spiritual hopelessness. The real intent of the truth of God and the covenant that he had with Israel had been twisted out of shape. Instead of giving life it weighed people down, and for the large majority of people it left them feeling distant from God and aware that they could never fix that problem. For

some it was even worse for it caused them to feel like somehow they were earning God's favor when in fact they were actually living in rebellion against God.

But what does this have to do with us? Neither of those situations exists in our world. Many people today would be offended by the assertion that they live in darkness. How are we to understand this? In what sense is our world dark? First, it is a spiritually dark world.

We understand this image of darkness. When we say someone is "in the dark" it means that person doesn't understand what is going on. The "dark ages" were times of ignorance. That is naturally true for all human beings right now. 2 Corinthians 4:4 says, "the god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ." There is an enemy at work in this world who is blinding people and keeping them from seeing the truth, and that is the source of great pain and suffering in this world. God sent Christ here to give us life, free us from enslavement to destructive lies, and when we fail to see the truth of that and live by it we end up with darkness.

One of the hard things about this dark world is even when we see the light of Christ we still live in a dark world that affects us. 1 Corinthians 13:12 says "now we see only a reflection as in a mirror." The English Standard Version translates that more accurately, "Now we see in a mirror dimly." In his paraphrase *The Message*, Eugene Peterson put it this way, "We don't see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through the mist."

That's what living in this dark world is like. One night when I was in college I was going to pick up a friend from the Ontario airport not far from our college. But that night a heavy fog rolled in. I remember driving out to that airport with my friend's brother through that thick fog. There was construction at the airport and that complicated driving around the area. We successfully navigated our way there and got my friend, but driving out the fog was so thick I could not see a thing. It was so bad we could not figure out how to get out of the airport because we couldn't see where to go. I finally just followed the taillights of the car in front of me hoping he would lead the way out. I remember coming to a stop and I could see his head lights shining on a sign that said, "Dead End" and another one that said "Open Ditch." Living in that fog meant we couldn't see where we were going or where we needed to go.

Unfortunately living in a dark world means at best we are trying to figure out our way through this world in a heavy fog. We have no idea what is going to happen in

the future. We can't see the spiritual realm at all and must take it almost totally on faith. We can't see or hear God. We can't see beyond the grave. We see injustice in this world that is never put right in our lifetimes. There is so much that we long to see, but cannot because of the darkness of this world. We try to find our way by following other people, only to find they don't know where they're going either.

This darkness has a profound and painful effect on people. Observe the pain and lostness of the human race. Everywhere you look people struggle to get along and to have some sense of peace in life. A couple of months ago I read J. D. Vance's book, *Hillbilly Elegy*. It tells the story of his growing up, his family and his community. Vance says unabashedly that he is from a hillbilly family. His youth was spent in a deeply dysfunctional context. His parents were divorced and his mother was an addict who kept a long chain of men coming along to be a "father figure" in their home. Sadly his story wasn't unusual. It was the norm. In broad swaths of our culture this is the reality. It is a story of pain, confusion, abuse, hopelessness and dysfunction.

I recently read a true story that is appalling. Two teenaged girls in Colorado wanted to do a kind deed. They decided they wanted to bake cookies and give them to neighbors. So they made their cookies then went around to the neighborhood, rang doorbells and left a plate of cookies on the porch. That's heartwarming, isn't it? Not so much. It seems one of the neighbors, seeing the plate of cookies on her doorstep had a panic attack, wondering who put them there and fearing they might not be safe to eat. It sent her to the hospital so she sued the two girls. A judge decided in her favor and ordered the girls to pay \$900 in medical costs. It's a dark world indeed.

It's a dark world because we live as Isaiah said in the shadow of death. The specter of our fearsome enemy death is never absent from our lives. I recently had a sort of minor reminder of it. I was going to take Ella, our granddaughter, back to her mom and dad, so I was out in the garage with the garage door open. Just at that moment one of Laurie's piano students arrived and I chatted briefly with the kid's dad. He asked how my arm was doing after surgery. He noticed some hockey sticks I have in the corner of the garage and asked, "So is the plan for you to go back to playing hockey when your arm is healed?" I laughed and said, "No, my hockey playing days are over. I'm too slow these days to play with anybody." I laughed, but oddly that brief conversation saddened me. I still have hockey sticks, skates and equipment in my garage. I haven't played in years, so why is it there? Because I have a hard time letting go. There's a little voice inside that says, "Maybe you can play again." But I can't. I'm too old, too slow, and too fragile to play hockey. My

loss of hockey, along with baseball, football, basketball and most other sports, is a little death. It is a reminder that life is ebbing away, that things are being taken away from me and that will increase in momentum until life itself is gone.

You might write that off as the melancholy musings of an old man, but the reality is this starts long before we get old. Recently I saw some articles about the high school football playoffs and I flashed back to an incident in my son's life. Before his senior year in high school two of Carissa's college friends were talking to him about playing football. They wistfully recalled their former playing days and told him, "Enjoy your last year all you can, because when it's done, it's gone forever." They both missed playing football. So Toby played, and he enjoyed it. His team had a good season, losing only one very close game. Then came the CIF playoffs. They made it to the semifinals. Leading up to the game he admitted that the season had been long and he was looking forward to no more football practices. I think he was affected by the fact that it was Thanksgiving week and when many of his friends were sleeping in he had to get up early every day and go to practice, especially on Thanksgiving Day. He said, "I really want to win this game and I think we're going to win, but if we lose I won't mind not having practice next week." But they didn't win. They suffered a heartbreaking last second defeat just when it looked like they were about to win the game. When he came out of the locker room after the game he admitted to me that he had cried in the locker room. With tears in his eyes he said, "I was wrong dad. I don't want it to be over."

At age 17 he had just gotten a taste of the reality that life takes things away. High school football for him was over and would never come back. There have been other little deaths along the way. Those little deaths are pointing toward the same thing. There is a big death coming and you can't stop it. Unfortunately we all have those little deaths. They are all sad, and they are all reminders of the same truth. We are living in the land of the shadow of death. The longer we go the deeper that shadow becomes.

We live in the darkness of ignorance, of not knowing for sure where life is going and what it all means, and the darkness of hopelessness in a world where there is so much evil that is ruled by death.

JESUS IS THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

Into this darkness came the light of Jesus Christ. He is the light of the world. In John 8:12 he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." In fact, he is the only light that can shine through the darkness of our condition. Think of what light does.

Gives life.

Scientists tell us that light is essential for life. Were there no light our lives would end quickly. Light is a necessary element of photosynthesis, which allows plants to grow and thrive. Those plants are the essential source of energy for all animals and ultimately for humans. Even in our verse we see that John links light and life.

Reveals what is true.

Light is necessary for us to see. One night recently I woke up with my ear hurting for some unknown reason. I tried to ignore it but the pain kept me from going back to sleep. After some fruitless time I decided to go down to the kitchen and take some pain reliever. In the kitchen I didn't want to turn a light on because I had that experience of having eyes adjusted to darkness then turning on a light. So I started looking in the pantry in the dark. I knew approximately where the medicine was and the shape of the bottle. I couldn't seem to find it but finally located it by feel...maybe. I came to my senses when I realized taking a medication in the dark by feel is probably a bad idea. I shut my eyes and turned on the light. After my eyes adapted I could see that I was on the wrong track. Instead of being in the pantry I saw that the pills I needed were on the kitchen counter. I'm pretty sure the laxative I was about to take would not have helped with my earache very much. The difference was light. Light enables us to see.

The light enables us to see what is real and what is not. In the dark we cannot see what is real, so we are susceptible to all kinds of illusions. Only the light shows us the truth.

Alleviates fear.

There is something kind of ominous about the dark. Maybe it's because we can't see what's really there and our imaginations take over and turn ordinary things into fearsome things. Whatever the case, everything is a little more scary in the dark.

Does anyone get an eerie chill walking through a cemetery in bright sunlight? Of course not. But how about at night? That's a different story. Several years ago when we were in New Orleans with Michael and Carissa we were walking through the Garden District and came on a cemetery. Cemeteries in that city are a little creepier than most because the water table is so high they can't bury bodies. So they build tombs above ground and put the dead in them. As soon as we entered this cemetery we were set upon by this man who wanted to tell us all about it and offered to give us a tour. We politely declined because he himself was more than a little creepy. He was just a guy who hangs out in the cemetery. That's a bit concerning to me. Walking through the place was actually mildly interesting.

However, while I am not superstitious and don't believe in ghosts, I assure you I would want no part of that place in the dark. I can't even say why, I just know it would make me kind of uneasy.

What child is afraid of monsters in the closet during the middle of the day? None. But at night, in the dark, suddenly the closet can hold all sorts of terrors. Light removes the fears. Maybe you've had the experience of being awake in the middle of the night when you want to sleep because your mind is worrying about something. During those dark hours the problem seems ominous and insurmountable. The next day when it is light out you think, "Why did that seem like such a big deal?"

Gives hope.

We have an expression about "the light at the end of the tunnel." A tunnel is dark, and the desire that expression refers to is to get out of the tunnel. Seeing light means there is hope that the end of the tunnel is near. Light gives hope.

I have shared before about one incident in my life that showed this. I was involved in a college ministry and we were taking 150 students to Catalina for a retreat. It was winter, and a storm hit the day we left. So we were out on that boat in the dark. It was cold, raining, windy and rough. People were seasick all over the boat. And it was pitch black out there in the ocean. It was miserable. I recall the power of seeing light finally from the harbor at Avalon. There was hope. In the darkness I seized on that light. It meant there was an end to the misery of that trip.

Jesus Christ is the light of the world. He is essential to life. He shows us the truth, enables us to know what is real. How are we going to know if God is real? And if he is real, how do we know what he is like and how we can be connected to him? There are a lot of illusions out there in the dark. What is real? John 1:18 says, "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known."

The Bible insists that God loves us. How do we know this is true? There have been a number of things that have happened to me that might cause me to question that. Just looking at life it is not intrinsically obvious that God actually does love us. A lot of people think he is indifferent at best. Jesus Christ proves that God is a God of love and that he loves us more than we can even imagine. He entered the world to experience the worst that human life could ever offer, to suffer with us, to suffer far more than we suffer so he can identify with us, all to rescue us, to shower us with his love and grace. How do we know we can be connected to God? Jesus

made a way. How do we know that justice will be done, that all things will be made right? Life doesn't prove it, but Jesus does. He is the light in the gloom of this world.

The light of Jesus doesn't give us the answer to all of the mysteries and questions life will throw at us. There will be times when we ask why certain things happen and we won't have the answer. That light won't answer other questions like what exactly is figgy pudding, and why is it so important to have it that we won't go until we get some? But that light tells us that God is real, shows us how to know him and be loved by him, and it gives us the answer we need for death. It answers life's biggest questions, who am I, why am I here and where am I going? Until we have answers for those questions we will ever be wandering hopeless and lost in the dark.

He gives us hope. He assures us by his resurrection that there is life eternal, life after death, and he has given it to us. That's by far the most important hope we could ever have. The late Christopher Hitchens was a world renowned atheist. At one point his publicist contacted Christian writer Larry Taunton and asked if he would set up a series of debates between Hitchens and some Christian leaders. Taunton agreed, and that began an unusual friendship between the Christian writer and the atheist antagonist. Hitchens stayed in Larry's home on a number of occasions. Late in his life as Hitchens was battling cancer Taunton and Hitchens took two road trips across America. Taunton recalls one beautiful day when they were driving through the Shenandoah Valley in the fall. Hitchens was reading the gospel of John. He read John 11:25-26 where Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live even though they die." Then he asked Martha, "Do you believe this?" Hitchens said he recognized the verse but didn't realize it was connected to the resurrection of Lazarus. Larry said, "It's a great verse." Hitchens took off his reading glasses and rather sarcastically said, "Do you believe this, Larry Taunton?" Larry said, "I do, but you already know that." Then he said, "The question is, do you believe this, Christopher Hitchens." He hesitated, then said, "I'll admit that it is not without appeal to a dying man." Even Christopher Hitchens came to realize he needed hope. The only real hope is in the light, Jesus.

Nothing in life is quite so scary once the light has come. We go through life like the disciples in the boat during the storm, fearing that they were about to drown. But Jesus was there, and that changes everything. There is hope in every situation we encounter because the light has come.

APPLICATION

REJOICE

The light has shined in your life if you believe in Jesus. You have hope, you have life, you know the truth. You were living in darkness but now a great light has dawned on you. That light, the light of Jesus Christ, produces and sustains life in you. It enables you to see the world as it really is, to know the truth about life, about God, about yourself and other people. That light shines continually every single day. Even on your darkest day that light shines. So rejoice in that light. Remember always how awful it is to live in the darkness.

Remember the great power outage of a few years ago. All of San Diego County lost electrical power. It made a huge mess. Traffic signals went dark so the roads became one big snarled gridlock. Lights, televisions, radios, refrigerators all were dead. It happened in the middle of the afternoon. We were able to get reports by listening to our car radio that warned the problem was going to persist for hours and possibly for several days. That night it was super dark, for there were no lights. We couldn't listen to music, watch television or even read because we had no light. That night after we had gone to bed the power came back on. I remember the sense of relief I felt and how good it felt to walk into a room, hit a light switch and have a light come on. Well we lived in that darkness. Without Christ we would still live in it. But in Christ the light shines brightly. What a huge relief. We have hope and we no longer fear the monsters in the closet. Relax and rejoice in the light.

LIVE AS A CHILD OF THE LIGHT

Do not go back to the darkness. Ephesians 5:8 says, "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of the light." After the power outage of 2011 when the lights came back on I did not long for those powerless hours of darkness. We should live in the light that Christ shines in our lives.

Remember that Jesus said in John 8:12 that those who follow him will never walk in darkness but have the light of life. The way to see what is true and what is real in this world, to have hope and alleviate fear is follow Jesus. When Jesus said he was the light of the world in John 8:12, the historical context was that Jesus was in the temple in Jerusalem during the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, or Succoth. In that area there were 4 enormous lamps, really huge torches. Each night of the feast they had a ceremony during which they lit those lamps. Ancient sources say they could be seen from every vantage point in Jerusalem. The Feast of Tabernacles commemorated the time when Israel escaped from Egypt and lived out in the wilderness. You might recall that God led Israel through the wilderness with a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. Whenever and wherever it moved, Israel

followed. Those huge lamps represented that pillar of fire, meaning God being with his people and leading them through the wilderness.

When Jesus said he was the light he was referring to those huge lamps and their significance. He is God with his people, guiding them through the wilderness and the dark night of this world. So we are to live following his light. When he says move we move. When he stops we stop. We go where he leads us.

This impacts every moment of our lives. I shared last week about some travails we have had with a local store that had sold us a clothes dryer at an excellent price but then failed repeatedly to deliver it. We got all kinds of apologies and sympathy from their customer service people who said they would solve the problem. Then they did nothing. Finally this week I went into the store in person to try to get something done. At first I thought I was going to have success, but then it all fell apart. Essentially they told me all they could do was start all over and sell me a more expensive dryer. I got all the way to the store manager and calmly explained how they had wasted many hours of our time, caused us considerable inconvenience and aggravation and how their own customer service people had said we should get a better dryer for the same price plus some compensation for how they had treated us, but at that point we had nothing. He said, "I am sorry, but all I can do is have you buy another dryer." Do you know that feeling when you have been treated very badly and you are just boiling inside? When you just want to explode at someone because of their awful treatment of you? I was right there, then I thought about the light of the world, that pillar of fire showing the way for me to go. And the way wasn't the nuclear option that I wanted to choose. In the end that helped me to go his way. They refunded my money. I calmly explained that their customer service was a bad joke, that it was inexcusable and that they certainly had lost me as a customer. Furthermore I said if they have a few others like me they were going to lose lots of customers, and that I intended to let their corporate headquarters hear the details of our experience with them. As I was about to leave the manager said that if I ever needed help with anything at their store to see him and he would take care of it. It was stunning. He apparently couldn't see the hilarious irony in his statement since I was there because I needed help, had asked for his aid and he had told me to take a hike. I don't want to be vindictive so I won't tell you which store this was. I will say, though, that dryer was most definitely not the Best Buy we've ever made.

My point is that the dark way, the way of this world, the natural response, is to be angry, to explode, to mistreat people who have mistreated you. But the light of the

world shows another way. The way of darkness will only deepen the darkness of this world. Only walking in the light will bring light.

Laurie and I right now have been trying to make plans for our Christmas with our family. Unfortunately these days that involves a lot of moving parts. The parts haven't been moving the ways we want them to move. We are a week away from Christmas and we don't know what this is going to look like. We know we are going to have Christmas dinner at our house, and that it will involve somewhere between 4 and 14 people. We thought we had it all planned and set 3 days ago and then we were thrown 3 straight curve balls. The problem is we don't control what everybody does. We don't know when we will get answers either. So how should we deal with this? We follow the light through the wilderness. Jesus will lead us where he wants us to go. That may not be what we originally planned, but it will be the right place.

LET YOUR LIGHT SHINE

In Matthew 5:14 Jesus said, "You are the light of the world." Then in verse 16 he said, "Let your light shine before others." We are the light because we have the light of Jesus in us. He wants that light to glow in the world.

We might think we don't give off enough light. Venus has albedo of 65, meaning 65% of light that hits it is reflected. The Moon has only an albedo of 12, meaning only 12% of the light hitting it is reflected, yet that light is brilliantly obvious on earth. We just needed to trust in Jesus and follow him and his light will shine. It doesn't take a lot of light to make a difference in a dark world.

One of the differences between Laurie and me is that she's not as gifted at sleeping as I am. If there is light in the room she has trouble sleeping. We have a cable TV control box in our bedroom. It has a small screen that either displays the time or the channel number it is tuned to. This is a very small screen and the numbers on it are not very bright, so it doesn't emit much light. But every night when we go to bed I cover that screen with a pillow, because if I don't Laurie will wake up sometime in the night and be unable to go back to sleep because the light is so bright. One night recently I woke up in the middle of the night and realized it seemed awfully bright in the room. I had forgotten to cover the cable box screen. I was amazed at how much light that little screen emits. Under lighted conditions it is hardly noticeable, but in the darkness of night it shines like a beacon. In darkness even the smallest bit of light is obvious. So let your little light shine. Don't fear the darkness of our world, for it only makes the light in you more apparent.