

“I Am: the Light of the World”

I am going to ask you to open your minds and unclutter your hearts and lend me your imaginations for a few moments if you will.

My name is Mary of Bethany. I live with my sister Martha and next door to our brother Lazarus and his family. We are all disciples of Jesus of Nazareth. Yes, you heard what I said! As a woman who has never been able to learn directly from a Rabbi, I never thought I would be able to refer to myself as anyone’s disciple! Especially Jesus!

You see, we are convinced without a doubt that Jesus is the Messiah that my people, the Jews, have waited for for thousands of years. He is so different from any religious leaders that I know. While many of them seem genuine enough, no priest or member of the Sanhedrin has ever taken a personal interest in Martha and me. But Jesus is different. He knows us so well, knows how different we are from each other and yet, values us both just the way we are.

As soon as I met him, he invited me to sit with Lazarus and the other men in the family to listen to his teachings. He knows that Martha would rather be putting up figs for the winter or sewing our brother’s tunics but that I love to listen to his thoughts about God’s word. And since disciple simply means “learner” that is what I have become.

I understand that YOU are disciples of Jesus too. That’s why I am anxious to tell you about what happened at our annual Festival of Tabernacles, sometimes called the Feast of Booths. I heard that you don’t observe that here in your temple, so let me fill you in on the history.

While we traditionally hold this annual celebration as a time to give thanks to Yahweh for the harvesting of crops, it is also a time to remember how He provided for our ancestors when they journeyed with Moses from Egypt to the Promised Land. Even though the distance was only about 250 miles, as the crow flies, it took them 40 years! But you know how men are about stopping to ask for directions! Miriam, Zipporah and the other women just had to grin and bear it!

Beginning on the eighth day of the seventh month, any Israelites who are able travel to the Temple in Jerusalem. Many build temporary booths around the outskirts of the Temple proper, as a reminder of the blessing that God always provided a place for His people to live, even in the desert. Then everyone dances and sings around the city in remembrance of the Israelites victory over Jericho.

Each morning during the week, priests carry water from the Pool of Siloam and pour it out on the west side of the altar to reminds us that God provided water for our people in the wilderness. And all the people chant from the prophet Isaiah, “With joy you shall draw water from the wells of salvation.”

Also, the priests have four HUGE candelabras that are lit in the courtyard of the women. ***They*** are supposed to remind us of the pillar of fire that led the Israelites through the wilderness. The glow from the lights is so bright it can be seen for miles. And the people sing, “Your Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path!” It truly is breathtaking!

One year, Jesus was staying at Lazarus’ house right before the Feast of Booths began and, since Bethany is so close to Jerusalem and we had planned to participate anyway, Jesus went with us. When the water was poured out on the first day, many of us could not help but remember that Jesus had recently said to us, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink.

And I will give you living water.” We did not understand what he meant, but it sure did anger some of the Pharisees. They even wanted to arrest him!

Somehow, the Festival didn't seem as much like a celebration as it had in the past. I don't know if my mind was fixed on that living water that Jesus spoke of or if it just seemed out of step with what we were learning from him. And Jesus seemed very different too. As if something were troubling him. Then, as soon as the lamps were lit and the people began to clap and sing, Jesus cried out in a loud, anguished voice, “I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD.”

We were stunned. It seemed so out of character for him. It was just not like Jesus to say something that sounded so egotistical. Usually he gives all glory to his heavenly Father. Yet, it was obvious that he was truly grieving. Peter, James and John ran over to him along with Mary Magdalene and put their hands on his shoulders as he leaned over in sorrow.

After a while he composed himself. And all of us, his disciples that is, gathered around him. We knew he had something important to share with us because he sat down. And usually, rabbis just teach while they walk. But Jesus IS different that way. He likes to look into your eyes when he talks about the Father.

He told us that God commanded the people to hold the Festival, said the command is right in the Law of Moses. But all of these other rituals were created by mankind. Then he repeated himself, this time quietly and calmly, “I am the Light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” Now, I am certainly not a scholar – I was just ALLOWED to start studying the Scriptures, but when he said, “I AM” I think he used the same Hebrew words that God used when he called to Moses out of the burning bush. And my thought must have been right because some of the men gasped when they heard it!

Then Jesus began to speak to us right out of his heart. THIS was the compassionate, approachable Jesus that we love. He said, “There are several things that happened today that grieve me. First, is the manner in which the people have distorted the way they use the Word of God for their own purposes. It is not wicked to pour out water and light candles. But ***“unless the priests and the people lift their minds and hearts to the Lord and experience change, these traditions are futile”***. (1)

Jesus continued, “I want you to understand that the festival itself gives neither light nor life. And unless we are moved by these joys to take them from the Temple and out into the world, they are useless. This light is of man – big manmade candles that shine light that can be extinguished. The light of God will shine forever in our hearts. Those candelabras only represent the good things of the past but don’t reflect the love of God that is present today. Or what God hopes you have learned from our past.”

Peter of course, spoke for all of us and said, “What were we supposed to learn teacher?” Jesus replied, “God called His chosen people to be a light to the nations. We failed horribly. ***“Israel faces a much greater judgment than the ‘unclean’ Gentiles because we have been given more light and yet have rejected it.”*** (2) The light that they were asked to shine was from God, for God’s people. All people! But when they wandered through the desert, they kept it to themselves.

Then Thomas asked, “Is that why YOU are here?” And Jesus smiled for the first time. It seems that is why he said that THOSE WHO FOLLOW HIM will have the light of life. If I understood him correctly, Jesus said that the sun gives light to the world. Physical light. But only God can give light to the soul. Spiritual light. And that when our ancestors just could not

catch on to what God intended, God sent us that spiritual light in Jesus. AND that his light is available to all, but only those who follow him will receive it!

I thought it was ironic that the religious leaders, the Pharisees, who are supposed to know everything, were rejecting the light even as it stood among them. They clapped and sang for the candelabras and ignored Jesus while he was in their midst! I think THIS is what upset him so. But I know that God's will always prevails. Because every time I watched a *crowd* of people reject Jesus, he simply turned away from them and sought out an individual who needed healing. His love is that personal and his light is that direct.

I think that must be how Jesus wants *us* to shine the light. Because Jesus came to be the light of the world, but he calls each of us to receive the light, to walk in it. Personally. So, what I came to believe that day is this: "Jesus is our light and we trust Him; He is our Leader and we follow Him; He is our Life and we grow in Him and reveal Him to this dark world." (Col 1:13-14) We cannot receive the light from history or science or any other discipline unless God's light shines on it first.

And I think Jesus was hurt, and maybe even a little frightened, that there was so much physical light in the Temple but there was still so much darkness in the minds and hearts of those who worshiped there. Didn't they realize that they really had nothing to celebrate as long as they ignored Jesus, the true light, as he shared God's love in so many ways?

And that I why I felt was so important to come here today and talk to you. I can see that you all have the genuine light of Jesus in your eyes and in your hearts. Although this Temple is not like any that I have ever seen before, I am sure it is a wonderful place to be disciples, to learn about God and God's son Jesus. I really feel the power of the Holy Spirit here – especially with your singing.

I am sure you understand that when we fellowship with God and meditate on God's word and obey God's commands that God's light shines "in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ." (2 Cor 4:6) And I know that today, millions of people profess to be followers of the Lord. What I don't understand is, if that is true, why there is so much darkness. And some days the world seems to get darker and darker.

So, I wanted to tell you how Jesus felt about the worship that took place that day at the Feast of Booths. The church lit festal lights but did nothing to transform the world. I am sure your Temple is not like that. I am sure you all know that – well to use Jesus' own words, "No one lights a light and then puts it under a basket. Instead they put it on a stand so it can give light to everyone in the house!" (Matthew 5:15)

I mean if there is one thing that I learned for certain that day, it's that Scripture won't give you light unless you live by it. So as a fellow disciple, I want to encourage you to shine the light of Jesus in every way you can. Love the loveless and the unlovely and the unlovable. Love yourselves. Love without jealousy or threat or ulterior motives.

Feed those who are hungry and invite them to your worship. Even if they don't look like you or speak your language. Offer hope to those who have none and give help without expecting anything in return. In other words, treat people the way YOU would want to be treated. Like Jesus treats you.

And I truly believe that if we all do these things, the light will shine in the darkness. And the darkness will not overcome it. Amen.

(1) He Walks with Me, Warren Wiersbe, David C. Cook Publishing, Colorado Springs, So,

2016, pg. 50

(2) Ibid, pg. 52