INTRODUCTION

If you were watching the Olympics this past week, you probably noticed a Jamaican sprinter by the name of Usain Bolt. Earlier in the week, Bolt won gold medals in both the 100 and 200-meter dashes. Then yesterday, with his Jamaican team, he won the 4x100 race. Usain now holds the world records in all three of those races. If you watched Usain like I did, you noticed what a showman he is. After winning his races, Bolt drew extra attention to himself holding up his number one finger, running an extra lap, kissing the ground, and doing a set of pushups. Adding this week's victories to his previous Olympic and world record championships, Bolt now declares, "I am a legend," and few would dare to disagree. Well-named, the Jamaican runs like a bolt of lightning that flashes throughout the world.

Today's sermon topic isn't about speed. But it is about the light of the world. Last Sunday, as we began a sermon series on the seven "I am" sayings in the Gospel of John, we explored "I am the bread of life." Today, in John 8:12, we hear Jesus make another declaration. Let's spend a little time this morning thinking about what Jesus might have meant when he said, "I am the light of the world."

1. THE CREATOR OF LIGHT

When we hear, "I am the light of the world," possibly the first thought that flashes through our minds is the truth that God is the creator of light. Genesis 1 tells us that, in the beginning, "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light . . . God separated the light from
the darkness" and that was "the first day." Genesis 1 also tells us that, on the fourth day, God created the "two great lights"--the sun and the moon--plus the expanse of the stars.

God was not alone in this light-creating process, however. According to John's gospel, Jesus was connected to and involved in that divine act. Among the four gospels, John is the one which has the highest Christology, or, to say that another way, John is the gospel with the most-divine Jesus. In comparison, the Gospel of Mark conveys the idea that the divinity of God's Spirit came upon the man Jesus when he was an adult, at the time of his baptism. Matthew and Luke both portray the Spirit coming upon the virgin Mary, so that Jesus would be conceived and born as the Son of God. But, in John's gospel, Jesus is referred to as the Word who "was God" and who "was with God in the beginning." John chapter one says that "through him all things were made." In the Gospel according to John, we hear Jesus declaring his oneness with God, the creator of light.

2. GOD/JESUS = THE LIGHT OF WORLD

When Jesus said, "I am the light of the world," however, he wasn't only talking about creating light the way that Thomas Edison invented, or created, the light bulb. Jesus also wanted to convey the idea that God and Jesus themselves are the light. We read this metaphor in First John 1:5--"God is light; in God there is no darkness at all."

You may recall that, in Exodus chapter 3, when God spoke to Moses from the burning bush, God said only "I am" or "I am who I am." God was being vague on purpose, so that Moses and the Hebrew people wouldn't be able to pin God down and trap God in a little box. The God who was calling Moses to rescue the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt didn't want to be
stereotyped or idolized in stone. God was amazingly complex and wonderful and wanted to be free to move and develop. That meant Moses and the Hebrews would have to get to know God through their relationship, over time and in changing circumstances. But, even so, God did give Moses a little clue right away in the fact that God's voice was accompanied by the light of the fire in that burning bush.

Hundreds of years later, in Isaiah 60, we hear another description of God as light. Giving hope to a nation that had suffered horribly from war, destruction, and exile, the prophet Isaiah told his people that the day was coming when their mourning would be over. "The sun will no longer be your light by day, nor will the moon shine for illumination by night." Instead, "the Lord will be your everlasting light."

When everything we know to be true and good and consistent is shaken--when even the sun doesn't seem to rise anymore--we can get pretty upset, angry, and depressed. But God assures us that, eventually, things will be alright. Ultimately, it isn't even the divinely-created sun, moon, or stars--or any other created thing--that gives us light. It is God--God's very own self--that shines in the darkness, showing us a path, and providing us a way to move forward.

Half a millennium or so after Isaiah wrote his words of comfort to the Babylonian exiles, this same divine characteristic of light was seen in Jesus. Speaking of the Word which was with God from the beginning, the Word which became flesh and dwelt among us, the first chapter of John's gospel tells us that "what came into being through the Word was . . . light for all people." The same God who enlightened Moses and gave hopeful words to Isaiah was present in Jesus, enlightening the people of the first century, showing them how to survive the harshness of Roman occupation, the rigidity of their own religious laws, and the destruction of their Jewish temple. The light of the world showed them (and us) that, no matter how bad it might seem, no
matter what oppression, prejudice, misunderstanding, sickness, loss, or disaster is causing
distress, the darkness will not prevail. When Jesus said, "I am the light of the world," he meant
that the light is not distant in time or place or weak in power. The light of the world lives among
us and shines powerfully in every generation because the light of the world is God.

3. **WE ARE LIGHT OF THE WORLD**

When Jesus said, "I am the light of the world," he may have had a third meaning in mind:

God created all of us to be the light of the world. Jesus spoke like this in the Gospel according to
Matthew. There, in chapter five, Jesus said, "You are the light of the world. Neither do people
light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to
everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before people, that they may see
your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."

God and Jesus are bright lights indeed. But we are also called to this role and function.
Because of the high Christology of John's Gospel, where Jesus is aligning himself with God, we
tend to think of Jesus' light as being so much superior to our own. But in John 14:12 Jesus said,
"I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing." In fact, said
Jesus, "They will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father."

When Jesus spoke his "I am" statements that sounded so blasphemous to his detractors,
he was claiming for himself what he really wanted all his followers to claim. We are the
children of God. We are united with God. If God is the light of the whole world for all time,
then we should at least be the light of the world in this time and place where we live.

How do we do that? Obviously, we follow the example of Jesus in caring for the
oppressed, the poor, the sick, and the victimized. We offer spiritual care, as well as physical.
We challenge the powers of greed and injustice in our society, and we live and communicate with each other in a way that shines the light of God in our own Christian community.

As I was thinking about the light we Christians are called to be, I remembered a book I've had on my shelf for a number of years. The title is *More Light, Less Heat*. The subtitle is *How Dialogue Can Transform Christian Conflicts into Growth*. The author suggests that—rather than fighting, fleeing, or denying—the best way to manage Christian conflict might be, instead, to engage in some dialogue. Dialogue doesn't reduce tension right away, he warns. But dialogue does "allow the tension to be transformed into the work of God."¹

The work of God. The light of God. The light of God and Jesus in us. We too are called to be the light of the world.

**CONCLUSION**

In the latest edition of *The United Methodist Reporter* newspaper, there was an interesting commentary about the shootings that took place at the Batman movie in Aurora in July. The article was written by a young minister, who had attended a similar midnight premiere of *The Dark Knight Rises* in his home state of Virginia. Rev. Anderson wrote that, when he was a child living in Illinois, he too had been at the scene of gun violence. It was May 20, 1988, when a woman entered his elementary school classroom, opened fire, killed one child, and wounded four more of his classmates.

Rev. Anderson said that horrific experience of his childhood caused him to become a fan of the superhero Batman, who had come into existence because of a similar tragedy. The story goes that, as a child, Bruce Wayne had witnessed his parents shot down in a dark alley outside a theater. Growing up with that trauma, Bruce Wayne "decided that he would become a symbol for a city that needed a hero." As the character states in the movie "*Batman Begins*, 'I'm going to
show the people of Gotham that the city doesn't belong to the criminals and the corrupt. People need dramatic examples to shake them out of apathy. I can't do this as Bruce Wayne. A man is just flesh and blood and can be ignored or destroyed. But as a symbol . . . as a symbol, I can be incorruptible, everlasting.\(^2\)

Rev. Anderson well knows the difference between the fictional Batman and the true and living God. But, as he writes, our human need is the same. We need to know that there is hope in our darkest hours. We need to know that there is a not only a Dark Knight but also a Divine Light who will fight the darkness when it engulfs us. And, I think, we need to know that that same Divine Light has created us to join forces with the one who said, "I am the Light of the World."
