

"You Are the Light" / Matthew 5:13-16 / 7 September 2025

"You are the light of the world," Jesus says to the rural poor of Galilee, those penniless and downtrodden day laborers and cropsharers and fishers and seamstresses who loved his words so well they followed him up a mountainside just to listen. Who had ever spoken to them in such a way? In a world where they seemed to matter little, in a far corner of an occupied land, just a dusty, backward province of the empire, they were little more than ghosts and shadows in the dreams of the mighty. But Jesus declares to them: "You are the light of the world, a city built on a hill that cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and hides it under a bushel basket. When you light a lamp, you put it on a lampstand, so that it provides light to everyone in the house." Think how that must have sounded in the ears of the unwanted. "You're the light. Let your light shine."

Happy 75th anniversary to you. It was on September 10, 1950 that this church held its opening service of worship, which we are partially re-enacting today. We don't know what the preacher said 75 years ago, nor the Scriptures he used. But we know what they sang on that day, and our order of service is pretty much the same as the one they used—except there was no children's sermon, for children were expected to sit still and listen to the adult sermon. Oh, and they also sang "Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus," which is not suitable for the 21st century; just trust me or Google it. However, Leah and Clara have agreed to play its familiar tune on their violins a little bit later. The theme of our anniversary celebrations is: Let our light shine. It's taken from these verses in Matthew. One thing you notice when you enter this sacred space is that it is not dark like so many other cavernous churches here in our city. Clear light streams through the windows to our right and our left. Our windows out onto the world are meant to be clear and bright, for we must see this world plainly if we are to love and serve it as Jesus instructs us. But our window up front, the one that represents not the world but the Mystery we name "God," that window is colorful and opaque, for it speaks of the beauty and the grandeur and the ever-rolling seasons of eternity to which we also belong. "Let our light shine."

Light is a funny thing. Have you ever been in this room in the dark, or just as the darkness is gathering? Have you seen this room in a different light? It can feel like a whole different place on Ash Wednesday at 7pm or Christmas Eve, all illuminated by candles. All the regular old places in your life can feel quite different depending on the light. There's the golden tint of the autumn sun, richer and yellower than in the summer. There's the glowering gray of a spring morning and the luminescence of the sun's hidden light on a cloudy, snowy day, sending its white glow through the panes. We all know the eerie orange glow that comes just before a really bad storm. Light changes things. It can change our mood, our perception, our ability to see. I love to go into the woods solo for backpacking adventures, where you arrive at a spot by a stream and you say to yourself, "This looks like a beautiful home for the night." You set up camp and get a bright fire going. But then darkness gathers in the gloomy pines all around you, and the gurgling of the stream starts to sound like...voices...and you hear a twig snap in the deep shadows, and you start to think how far you are from your car. I always download a movie onto my phone to take my mind off the darkness when I'm alone in the woods at night. I know that's cheating. But a place that seemed to be a welcoming, lovely woodland spot in the daylight...it can take on a whole different feel as the light fades. This changing world, this changing light. And yet, the calling that Jesus voiced to the rural poor of his day is still ours today and in every age: You are the light; let your light shine.



We've just read and heard a brief snippet from Jesus's most famous discourse, the Sermon on the Mount. Homiletically, the Sermon on the Mount is a bit of a mess. My godson in Cameroon has me teaching a seminary-level class on preaching via zoom, where I tell my students that a sermon is an essay. It must be guided by a single, clear thesis statement, and supported by two or three topic sentences, which restate the thesis in different ways. But Jesus? Jesus didn't need all the rules that we lesser preachers have to follow. Why? Because Jesus saw into people's souls. When Jesus spoke, the people felt seen, known, loved. The Sermon on the Mount can afford to be a structural disaster because it speaks to all the stuff that its hearers are thinking about. It talks about worry and anxiety. It speaks of human worth and guilt, of power and fear. It promises its hearers that God loves even the birds, and that they matter more than many birds. Jesus doesn't need all the gimmickery of modern preaching because he understood his listeners so well; he spoke urgently and meaningfully into their lives. But if you know your gospels, you'll notice something strange in this passage. In a famous line in the gospel of John, Jesus says, "I am the light of the world." But here in the older book of Matthew, Jesus says, "You." "You are the light of the world." And you are. You're the light of the world. Let your light shine. The world would be dark without it. Let it shine.

Think about the year 1950, a year that many of us can only imagine and not recall. Silly putty had just been invented. Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, the Lone Ranger, I Love Lucy. World War II was still fresh in everyone's minds, and America was living into its new role as a military power, flexing its muscles in Korea. Communism was the new scare, something to rally against, and McCarthyism conducted witch-hunts, seeking out supposed communists at all levels of society. The old European empires were crumbling under their own weight; the French were getting pummeled in Vietnam and North Africa. But America? We were the new empire, the divinely-appointed city on a hill, a beacon of light to all the world. Or so we believed, and we really did believe it. It was an age of growth and optimism. Suddenly, everyone could have their own house with a tree and a garage. Blacks fleeing Jim Crow laws down South were arriving in great numbers in Northern cities. White people were moving out to the suburbs—ostensibly for the fresh air and so that they could have yards and detached houses with off-street parking. In reality, it was at least in part because they didn't want to share their neighborhoods with the new arrivals. The nation was vast, and everyone seemed to be on the move—California issued its siren call. But Pennsylvania was the crucible, the forge on which the nation was being hammered out. People were suddenly becoming more interested in religion, too. It was not one of the great so-called revivals, which took place occasionally down through our history. It was an age when belonging to a church was a social expectation. At church, you met your neighbors, rubbed shoulders with business associates, showed off your best clothes once a week. The historic Mainline Protestant denominations were growing fast because they had a cachet of historicity and respectability. They didn't ask people to do anything too religious or too crazy. Give us an hour on Sunday mornings, drop some money in the plate, sit on a committee, and you're good. As the suburbs rapidly overtook the farmland south of Pittsburgh, a young, charismatic seminary graduate named Bill Barker went knocking on the doors of newly-constructed homes, inviting people to a new church that he was starting—a sort of overflow congregation for Southminster. Barker intended it to be a neighborhood church, nothing more. But a congregation will always develop an identity, and within a decade of its founding social upheaval gave us ours.



The Civil Rights Movement was raging across the land. Most churches, especially in the suburbs, stuck their heads in the sand and just hoped it would end. "It's not our business. It's not our problem. We're just trying to get into heaven...and share casserole recipes. We feel bad for those folks, but here in America, there's liberty and justice for all. They need to stop complaining." But Barker and other leaders of this congregation could not look away. "Wait, look. There's real injustice right here in the land of the free." Barker began preaching a whole new genre of sermon: the social justice sermon. In time, preaching wasn't enough. The session of the church sent him to represent them at the Selma March, and as a result a church of 1,800 members lost about 800 who said, "We have no business getting involved in all that stuff. It's for black people and Southerners. It's not our concern." But the ones who stayed? The ones who stayed were those who cared about this world, who believed that Jesus calls us to stand against injustice—and a congregational identity was born. It took about 15 years, but Bower Hill emerged as a church that cares about this world, not just the next one; a church that will stand with the marginalized, the disenfranchised, the unwanted, the folks that Jesus called "the light of the world." Our job, looking to today and tomorrow, must be to remind the unwanted that they are the light of the world.

That is who we are to this day, and as we look to the future, that is who we must be. Our calling is to see the light in those nobody wants. Our calling is to draw the marginalized out of the shadows and help them to shine their light on this dark world. That identity did not end with civil rights. In the 1970s, we held dances and boxing matches, for which some current members of First Baptist used to walk up the hill from Bridgeville to attend. In the 1980s we had female pastors, which were most uncommon. In the 1990s, we hosted a family fleeing the Balkan war. In the 20-tens we began water purification work in Haiti, followed by housing homeless families in our building. 2014 saw us conducting the first of many gay weddings in this room. That's the same year that the director of South Hills Interfaith Movement told us in a letter, "Bower Hill, I wish I could clone you." In 2019 we started standing with refugees and immigrants; it cost us a few more members, which I regret. But it's always costly to live into your calling.

This is only a brief survey of the ways Bower Hill has reached out to people on the margins. It's what we do; it's who we are. And it's who we will remain as we lean into the future God holds for us. It's how we shine the light that's been entrusted to our care. Look at the colors in the window behind me. Did you know that light not only lets you see colors, it creates color. Light is energy, like most things, but it travels in beams. When the beams hit an object, all the colors contained by the light absorb except the color you see. It's believed that some animals can see colors that human beings don't even know exist. When Jesus calls the poor people of Galilee "the light of the world," isn't he saying that they add beauty and color to everything, that they bring clarity and vision, that they show the way? There are undiscovered colors in this universe, just waiting for the light to call them out! Some churches will call out the colors of the world by making use of the arts. Others will put on a spectacular worship service. Others will have after-school programs or a really good concert series. That's how they shine their light. We will let our light shine by drawing the outsider in. Return to those bedraggled poor on the mountainside, to whom Jesus said, "You! You are the light." That is our task, it is our calling: to see the light where no one else sees it. To name it. To let it shine. Happy 75th, Bower Hill. Now, let our light shine. Amen.