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Let It Shine
Psalm 27:1-5, Matthew 5:14-16
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There's something about light. When a bad dream wakes us in the middle of the night, we turn on the light and our fear dissolves. We get ready for Christmas by putting lights on trees and buildings, and we celebrate the Fourth of July with fireworks that light up the sky. Even though almost every home in America has electricity, candles are a multibillion dollar industry. Because there's something about light. It's comforting, it helps us see better. It attracts people.

I love our two scripture readings today. "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?" And "You are the light of the world." I think there's something especially powerful in this image of a city on a hill.

Now, each of us glows a little bit on our own, because each person in this room is made in the image God. We all reflect the divine image, each of us in our own unique way. It's not anything we've earned or deserve, it's just how God made us. When we do things like lose our temper, or put people down, or refuse to share, it's harder for people to see that divine presence in us. Kind of like when I drive through the mud and the mud splashes onto the lights of my car, the mud will make it harder for people to see the light shining out of my car's headlights. That might be a good way for us to think about sin—that sin is the gunk that covers up the light of God and keeps it from shining like it could.

On the other hand, when we do things like go out of our way to welcome and include the new kid, or the shy kid, or the goofy kid . . . when we befriend an older person who can't drive anymore and help them get to church or the doctor . . . when we listen with patience and grace to someone with whom we disagree, and refuse to give up on finding common ground . . .

whenever we freely share the time and talents that God has entrusted to our care . . . those actions clear away the grime and let God's light beam out of us.

You've probably heard the story about the pastor who went to visit a man in his congregation who hadn't been to church for quite some time. The story goes that it was a cold winter evening, and the man had a fire going. He welcomed the pastor and had him sit down in a comfortable chair next to the fire. The pastor didn't say anything, but just looked at the fire, and after a while, he took a pair of fireplace tongs, pulled an ember from the burning fire and placed it off by itself on one side of the hearth.

The ember glowed for a minute, and then it went out. Cold and dead, no light. The pastor and the man sat in silence, looking at the hearth. Without saying a word, the pastor took the tongs again, picked up the dead ember, and put it back in the middle of the fire, and immediately it began to glow with the light and the warmth of the burning coals around it.

The pastor got up to leave, and the man said, "I'll be back in church on Sunday."

That is a moldy oldie of a story, but what I like about it is the way it shows how we glow more brightly when we're connected. There's power in being together. Let me give an example:

A couple weeks ago, some visitors stopped by to see our Tiffany windows, which happens all the time. This little group of visitors included some people from South Korea, and Carol Sook, who was our office volunteer that day, welcomed them and then came and found me in the office and said, "Sandra, wouldn't you like to come and say hello to them?" Some of their group were from a Presbyterian church in South Korea that had been founded with the help of a former associate pastor from this church many years ago. This was not the first time that people from that South Korean church have visited, but it was still very special, as Carol instantly recognized.

I promptly replied, “Yes, I’ll be there in just a minute.” I said that because I knew it was the right thing to say, but the introverted, task-oriented person inside of me thought, “I don’t want to come say hello to anybody. I want to stay right here and get this project done.”

After a minute, I got up, and came here into the sanctuary. I watched as Carol modeled for me what good hospitality is all about. She treated those visitors as if having them come by to see our windows was the best thing that could possibly happen to her and the best thing that could possibly happen to this church. She was warm, she was genuine, she gave them five-star attention. Carol smiled her big, mega-watt smile, and pretty soon I was smiling, and greeting, and chatting, and posing for pictures, and I was thankful to do it. Carol’s glowing warmth caught something inside of me and made me glow, too. Her warmth made me warmer.

This happens all the time. I see the amazing, loving things you do, and it touches me and makes ME better. Hopefully we all do that for each other.

When you start school this week and go into your new classroom . . . when you go to work, or the store, or wherever you’re going. . . remember that you are the light of the world. That you reflect the image of God to the world in a very special way that nobody else can. And that you are not alone, but you have all the warmth, all the energy, all the strength, and light and brilliance of the whole family of God with you. As we baptize people this morning, and confirm young people in their faith, as we welcome new faces into the life of the church, imagine embers joining the fire so that we all shine more brightly. . . thanks be to God.