Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”

It was one of the busiest travel days of the year, December 21. The Nashville airport was decorated with lights, trees; Southwest airline employees had on their reindeer antlers and Santa hats. There was live country music. In all the waiting areas there were families, strollers with crying babies, wheelchairs, people travelling alone, eating, napping, filling the wine bar … with happy, tired, lonely, expectant, wistful faces … Fred, do you remember him? He was there, too, talking intently to people on either side of him! All of this amidst coming or going home for Christmas … this year a new baby, a new family member, a son or daughter in a new job not able to come home, a new diagnosis to deal with, a loved one no longer at the table.

It was the first time in 57 years that my Mom and I celebrated the day of Christmas without the one who has been the true anchor of our family, the one who in many ways MADE Christmas for us. My Dad was such a light! There have been moments in the past weeks when I found myself in a dark place.

The Temple at the time of Jesus could be a dark place. But during the week-long Festival of Tabernacles it was decorated by four ENORMOUS candelabras, that brightly illuminated the whole Temple … reminding the people of the time when God was surely their LIGHT, how He had clearly been with them, guiding them with LIGHT in their wilderness journey, the cloud by day and the fiery pillar by night, bidding them to follow the light. Oh, how they longed for this light again in their dark times, the fulfillment of the promises of the coming Messiah as foretold by the prophets - “Arise, shine, for your light has come. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” They wanted God to be their light again (though they could not have imagined what KIND of light) … And as if those huge candelabras lit for 7 days in the Temple would bring that light back.

And Jesus stood among them and said “I am the Light … of the world.” And hasn’t the world always needed light!

My Dad wrote about a time of real darkness in Holland during WWII, during that last winter of the war, called the “Hunger Winter of 1944.” He wrote about how young Dutch men ages 17-50 were forcibly sent by the tens of thousands to Germany to work. The Germans set whole areas of Holland under water, ruining livestock, agriculture, food.

By November there was no more gas, electricity or coal. People dismantled wood wherever they found it, in houses, railroad ties, trees on the streets, for heating or cooking, whatever morsels of food there were. By Christmas the temperatures had become ice cold. People lived in unheated...
houses, without electricity, batteries or candles. A bit of oil on top of a half-filled glass of water and a burning wick was the only glimmer of light.

My Dad was nearly 21; here and there he was able to earn a bit, and continued his work in the Dutch underground, helping suffering people. But he also took some singing lessons, and found a new study partner, Trudy. Trudy’s father owned a jewelry store; the family residence was right behind the store … they lived very close to a drawbridge across a canal, which the Germans used for their shipping.

When dusk set in, Trudy’s father would put wooden shutters on all the outside windows. To his delight my Dad discovered that the family still had candles, and light! After Dad had been in their home a number of times, Trudy’s father said to his wife and Trudy, “I believe he can be trusted,” whereupon he turned a light switch and it was light all over the place! Incredible! This meant also that there was heat, an electric stove for cooking, current for reliable radio broadcasts. It was a miracle! Somehow Trudy’s father had managed to “tap into” the electric cable to the drawbridge the Germans used. All the electricity and light he used was free of charge … courtesy of the Germans.

During those dark years, not wanting to endanger his own Jewish father, my Dad was blessed to live for a time with another family. Before dinner in the evening, father Dekker would bring out the large family Bible and read a passage of Scripture. Then he would say a prayer. After they had eaten the meal together, father Dekker would pray and say thanks again. This made a lasting impression on my Dad, a balm for his hungry soul.

At age 19, he was confirmed in the Dutch Reformed church. And the sermon passage for that confirmation Sunday was John 8:12 … Jesus said, “I am the Light of the world.” Light was so important to my Dad. Yet is wasn’t until years later, when he came to the United States, trying to find his way, stepping into Hollywood Presbyterian Church … meeting young people who had such joy and light in them … that Dad realized it wasn’t a circumstance, a place, any electricity or lamp that brings TRUE light, but a PERSON who enters our world … our struggle, darkness, fears, with His light. A God who enters EVERY circumstance, every one we could possibly think of, with HIS Light.

And Jesus makes a stunning PROMISE … “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” Never walk in darkness? How could that be? I grappled with that, even as I one night this week walked through the pitch-black basement of our church, with the flashlight on my cellphone … spreading out just enough light ahead of me. If we’re following Jesus, we won’t walk in darkness. There may be a time of darkness, but somehow, we won’t walk in it.

Scholar Dale Bruner calls it “the Light of REAL Life,” that can see, doesn’t walk blindly, has been healed at the foot of the cross … and promised eternity. When the pains of life, or grief, or our sin get us off course, we fall back behind Jesus and follow him, watch him, listen to Him, be comforted by him, be in community with other followers, and worship. It’s a light that can make us uncomfortable at times; but it’s the light that makes us whole. No more huge candelabras in the Temple needed … mere rituals, when God offers relationship.

What have we done with the Light of the World this past year? At the beginning of December, I received an Advent calendar that goes all the way through the 12 days of Christmas! This week it
had a wonderful little exercise of question, like that game of questions that you can answer around the
dinner table with your family, or your friends, or your cat! During 2018 what was often your first
thought in waking up in the morning, or your last thought at night? Which people besides your family
were especially important to you? What hurt you this year? What was your most important
discovery? Have you in the past year laughed until you cried? Have you at least once let your
tears run freely? Have you clearly said “no” to someone this year? What are you proud of this past
year? From whom would you still want to ask forgiveness? Have you met God?

As we reflect on and release 2018, and begin a fresh new year, a new year of sure adventure,
it’s a FRESH opportunity to OPEN the windows of our soul widely, to the Light of the World, and to
follow, and also to shine! By the light of Jesus, we can really see life, what it is; we can see ourselves,
one another, and who God is!

Some children were putting on the Christmas play. To show the radiance of the newborn
Savior, an electric lightbulb was hidden in the manger. All the lights were to be turned off so that
only the brightness of the manger could be seen. BUT, the boy who controlled the light got confused:
ALL the lights went out. It was a tense moment, broken only when one of the shepherds said in a loud
stage whisper, “Hey, you switched off Jesus!” That is not possible!

For it is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness” who has shown in our hearts to
give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”