Isaiah 60:1-3, John 8:12-20

“It’s hard to soar like an eagle when you’re surrounded by turkeys”

It is great to be behind this pulpit again after a week off. I so appreciate Dr. Wilson and his willingness to step in at anytime and bring a great Word to us about God’s presence in our midst. We are so blessed with ordained pastors in this congregation who call this place their home of worship. We didn’t go very far, just stuck around and spent time with the family.

Yesterday this church family showed up in force for mulch day which actually became more like mulch hour. We had a great time and kind of fed off each other working side by side. That happens you know. You find yourself side by side with people who love life and you start to love it too. You find yourself next to someone who loves spreading mulch, and you start to like spreading mulch too. You find yourself sitting in the pew next to someone who loves being a part of this church family, and you want to be a part of it too. The converse it true as well, so be careful how you project yourself to those around you.

There is no denying the real tangible effects of those around you for both good and bad. This past week three of Jahar’s friends, you know the 19 year old man who was responsible for the bombs of Boston, were arrested for trying to cover up for their friend. It is pretty well assumed that his older brother radicalized him when he came back from Russia. The impact of spending time with someone intent on killing turned him into a killing machine as well, and I wonder how universally that can be applied to us and our relationship with our Savior. Where we spend our time and with whom will have an influence on us.

When I was growing up, twice, once in elementary school and once in high school, I got into trouble so bad that my parents banned me from seeing my best friend. Their thinking was there is no way that Bobby could have thought by himself to put holes in the hose of the gardener on his own so that when he turned on the water it would spray like a fountain. Or, there is no way he would have on his own in high school made such bad choices so it must have been his friends who influenced him to do those things. There may have been some truth in that thinking, but not much. My friends’ parents were probably happy to not see me around that summer.

As parents we care about who is influencing our kids and we are protective of them so they grow up to be what they envision, or maybe what we envision. I remember flying out to Washington State to ask for Stacy’s hand in marriage from her parents without her knowing. It was a good conversation, after 5 minutes Dave said, well, that’s great. I’m happy for you both. I’m going to bed, there’s a Huskie game tomorrow. Dianne and I stayed up pretty late talking and I’ll never forget what she said to me before she went to bed: Bob, Stacy is a special girl, she has a lot planned in her life, don’t get in her way of realizing her dreams. Basically, don’t bring her down. For the last 20 years I’ve been bringing her down.

But the general implication and application is if you surround yourself with good people, you’ll turn out good. If you surround yourself with success, you’ll succeed. Now the converse is also true. Today, we find ourselves back in the Gospel of John and Jesus’ first statement in our Scripture is that he is the light of the world and any of his followers, if they truly follow him, those who choose to spend time with him will never walk in darkness. That sounds pretty good doesn’t it? Let’s see what it takes to be in the presence of our Lord and to be surrounded by him so that we can soar in life.

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It has been a couple weeks since we looked at the Gospel of John, but we are back in it completely now. Last week I just planned my sermons through August and it takes us all the way through John 12. That’s over half the Gospel will be completed in two years. That’s not bad. Last time we looked at John we went over the story of the adulterous woman who was dragged to the square ready to be stoned to death. We saw that the sin of others is not to be celebrated, yet everyone deserves a chance to be brought to Jesus for his judgment, which is always one of grace.

We find vs. 12 in our Scripture Jesus again speaking to those around him. Where does Jesus find himself as he is speaking to those around him? Who remembers? The same place where he was with the woman. In the temple and he is seated while he is teaching with others standing around him listening to his teaching. After the woman walks away, or maybe she just slips into the crowd and stays around listening to our Savior as he teaches. “I am the light of the world.” He proclaims.

Let’s start with that statement and just the first couple words of that sentence. In the Greek: I am, is Ego Eimi which is direct title for whom? Who else says I am in the Bible? How about our creator God as he faces Moses in the burning bush. Who am I supposed to say sent me? I am, that should be enough. They’ll get it. Twice in these verses Jesus uses this name to describe himself as the great I am, here and in vs. 18 reads literally I am the one who testifies on my own behalf.

It is very important to see Jesus self-identifying using this OT title for God the Father, especially in light of the second half of this declaration. I am the light of the world. Now, this may sound a bit familiar because we find in Matthew 5:14 he says to his disciples – You are the light of the world. Jesus as the basic, fundamental light of the world is found in John 1:4, in him was life and the life was the light of the all people, the light shines in the darkness.

So Jesus, for the sake of his disciples, establishes himself as the light of the world with the implication that if you spend enough time with him, he’s going to rub off, his light will be transferred to us to the point where we will reflect his light and so in turn we will be the light of the world. Jesus’ role as the light of the world can’t be minimized or cast aside as insignificant because his light makes us the light.

Now, in this Scripture we find that his arch-enemy is present and they accuse him of bragging in vs. 13. You’re just speaking on your own behalf. That would be the Pharisees. But he relays something so important here that is fundamental to understanding this concept of spending time with Jesus changes everything. They accuse him of bragging, but he says something about : “I know where I have come from and where I am going.” Probably the single most pervasive problem that influences people the most is either low self-esteem or an identity that is so wrapped up in the past that it is impossible to see a hopeful future.

When we grow up in a family that says you are loved, you are special, you are precious, well, then you begin from a very young age to believe it. But often that is countered by kids at school, or on the playground so say you are worth nothing and so you have to make a decision what are you going to believe? Your family, or these kids that you really want to like you and maybe the only way to have them like you is to believe what they say so over time you are more and more influenced by those around you and less and less influenced by what your family says.

You see, we all crave to some degree affirmation. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard my kids after I’ve tried to encourage them: but dad, you have to say that because you’re my dad. The implication is that either I don’t mean it or it doesn’t really count because I’m just dad. But if someone else says it, well, that changes everything. We all need approval from someone. As a result we often make bad decisions in regards to promiscuity just so we can feel good and hear someone say nice things. Or we get caught up in other self-destructive behaviors because at least for a moment we get approval from those around us.

Our identity of who we are has been shaped by where we come from and who surrounded us when we were growing up. We are shaped by where we are going, what we see as our future to be like. The more limited the view of our future, the less we normally like ourselves.

Jesus turns that all upside down. His statement that he knows where he came from reminds us that we know where we came from, our Creator loved us so much he made us in his image. Jesus reminds us that if He knows where he is going then we certainly know where we are going once this life is over, once the tomb is empty. We will be spending time in eternity with Jesus, surrounded by loved ones and the saints of the church. No Christian who has a living relationship with our Savior should ever feel unworthy because our Savior has claimed him as His own and made him worthy. That’s where we come from, he gives us our value and our worth.

Jesus is our alpha and omega, beginning and ending, and so our worth is drawn from him much like the light we have is a reflection of the light he has given us. The prophet Isaiah speaks of us arising, for our light has come. It is thought to be directed to the nation of Israel and specifically the nation of Israel being a light to those nations around them. This past week was the national day of prayer and I’m good with praying for our nation, even that God would bless America. We sing that in this church. But if that implies God blessing America to the detriment of other nations, then I do have a problem with that. I do not believe that God has blessed America any more than he has South Korea, or Germany, or any other nation.

When Jesus says that no one who follows him will ever walk in darkness it is a call to be separate, distinct. We live in a culture that understands this concept here in Strasburg. It is hard to soar like an eagle when you are surrounded by turkeys. But shining the light of God is not a call to elitism. We have an incredible security in our Savior that no nation or any friendship could ever give us. Jesus promises we will never walk in darkness.

But even so his light was constantly shining among the sinful, the prostitutes, hypocrites, tax collectors, you know, people just like you and me. He was always in the crowd, and yet his light was able to shine.

What a crowd we had Friday night for the Westminster Bell Choir. I saw all of you there as you were leaving. What a destination point we have become. This was a part of our vision to be the heart of the city, to be the place where people will stream to in order to discover the light of God and to basque in his presence.

But being a shining light in the community can also make you a target. In 2009 while we were in Russia we began a medical clinic because our African members of our church were not allowed in many of the hospitals. Two of our women while they were in labor and we put them in an ambulance were dropped off on the side of the road and refused to be taken to the hospital. So we started a free clinic and it gained some notoriety. BBC, NPR, and CNN each did a story on our clinic and in the BBC report they showed our primary doctor and he was fairly critical of the medical situation in Russia. A week later he went to a conference in Kazakhstan and then tried to re-enter Russia and they refused him entry. His wife and kids were stranded in Moscow and had to finish out the school year along, by themselves.

To mix metaphors soaring like an eagle can also mean that you will fall pretty hard. You’re up there pretty high. It might be safer to stay on the ground like a turkey, but it isn’t where God necessarily want you to be. I pray that we won’t every be afraid of letting Jesus’ light shine through this church even if it puts us in a risky position. Our sense of security cannot come from the familiar, it has to come from the one with whom we spend the most time, the one who never leaves or abandons us.