



November 30 & December 1, 2019  
Pastor Ellis White

## **i ≠ him: I ≠ light**

*John 1:1-8*

Welcome to Chapel Hill. My name is Ellis White, and I am the Pastor of Weekend Services. And before we get started on this new sermon series, I wanted to take moment and reflect back on our past series: For Your Neighbors. Thank you to those of you who submitted stories; I want to take a moment to celebrate how God is using this church to be for our neighbors, by sharing one of those stories.

One woman has been hosting open houses at Christmas for the last four years, but has decided to start having once/month coffee mornings for their neighbors as a result of this series. But just when she thought she was done, God intervened. This is what she writes: “Last week I received an email (along with everyone else on the street) from a fairly new neighbor asking if anyone could drive their 2 kids to the bus stop every morning. I knew right away that this was from God and for me. I responded with a yes, and will start dropping off the kids next week!”

That’s awesome! We would love to hear your stories. So as well as keeping on sticking your stickers on the map, we would love to hear and celebrate what God has been doing through you. If you have a story to share, you can write it on the pieces of paper next to the map and put it in the basket, or you can send us an email at [communications@chapelhillpc.org](mailto:communications@chapelhillpc.org)

I joked last week about perhaps this last series feeling like we’re being asked to put on our super-neighbor capes and start flying around the neighborhood. And although I was only joking, I think we are often prone to act like we are superheroes, especially this time of year. There is so much to think about and prepare for, and so many demands being placed upon our lives that it can become a really stressful time.

I was reflecting to my wife this past week that this time last year, I was struggling with bad acid reflux and a 3-month long sore throat making singing every weekend agonizing. And this time two years ago, when we were stuck in England, wondering if we would ever be granted a visa to return to the US, I was inflicted with kidney stones. And this time three years ago, when I was finishing off seminary, I got a rash all over my body—the only saving grace was that the rash looked like Christmas trees!

I reflected that at this time of year, I tend to go into overdrive, thinking that I have superhero-like strength and abilities in order to do all that needs to be done. And then my body decides to remind me of the truth: Ellis, you aren’t a superhero. That’s what our advent series this year is all about. It’s a reminder that we aren’t a superhero, and in reality, there is only one superhero: Jesus.

In college, I majored in math and so I love using mathematical symbols wherever possible. We're using one in the title of this series and it looks like this. It's an equals-symbol with a diagonal line through it, which means, does not equal. And we are titling this series  $I \neq \text{Him}$ . Because we think this is a time of year when we need to be reminded that we are not equal to Jesus. (That's who the "Him" is in the title.) We need to be reminded that there is only one person who is the light in the darkness, the hope to the hopeless, the peace to the restless, the joy to those in mourning, and that is Jesus. And you and I do not equal Him.

And we're going to journey through the first chapter of John's gospel—one of the accounts of Jesus' life—to explore this theme. And the reason we want to go there is because John, who is writing, flips back and forth between talking about two people. One of them is Jesus and he paints this amazing picture of who Jesus is. The other of which is John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin. And the picture that this passage consistently paints of John the Baptist, is that he knew he wasn't Jesus. If anyone could say,  $I \neq \text{Him}$ , and really mean it, it was John the Baptist.

So, I'm going to read to you the first few verses of John 1 this morning. It will be up on the screens, or you can follow along in your Bibles or on your Bible app. John 1:1...

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."  
(John 1:1–5 ESV)

Bible scholars refer to John 1 as the prologue, because it functions as such: it is a separate introductory section to this account of Jesus' life, and John begins right at the beginning, even before the world was made. He describes a person or entity, who he calls the Word, or in the original Greek: *logos*. At this point, John doesn't immediately reveal the identity of the Word, but we know, because we've read ahead, that the Word is Jesus.

John says that the Jesus existed way back at the beginning of everything, where he was with God, and in fact, was God himself. And that everything was made through Jesus. Through Jesus, literally came life itself, like light shining into the darkness. Jesus was the life-light, blazing in the darkness that couldn't be put out.

And at this point, as we're reading, it feels like we should continue on with this description of who this Word is. It doesn't yet feel resolved; it feels like the climax of this great song is still to come, and so we keep reading, but then it feels like a big interruption. It kind of reminds me of this...

**[VIDEO: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xrAIGlkSMIs>]**

All the attention is fixed on Jesus, ready for the next revelation of who he is, and then John, who is writing, seems like he gets distracted, although, in reality, I don't believe this is a distraction at all. Let's go back and read from verse 3 and see how this happens...

“All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.”

(John 1:3–8 ESV)

It’s the writer’s “squirrel” moment. He suddenly turns his attention from Jesus to this man sent from God named John. And just to be clear, John the Apostle, who is writing, is different from the John that he is talking about. The John that he is talking about, we later find out, is Jesus’ cousin, John the Baptist. John, the Apostle, has a “squirrel” moment, when looking at Jesus, and turns his attention suddenly to John, the Baptist. And this isn’t the only time in this chapter. In fact, we’re going to look at four of these “squirrel” moments in this chapter over the next four weeks.

As we were reflecting on this, we realized that this probably wasn’t accidental, or the result of bad writing, or the result of undiagnosed ADHD. Actually, this was probably highly intentional. Why? I believe the writer is trying to draw a contrast between Jesus and John the Baptist. We see it right there in verse 8:

“[John] was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.”

(John 1:8 ESV)

The writer is trying to help us see that John the Baptist is not the one we should be following, or worshipping or praising, even though he literally was the GOAT, according to Jesus. (That’s an acronym for Greatest of All Time. GOAT.) Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.” (Matthew 11:11 ESV) John was the GOAT, according to Jesus, and yet, as the writer of John 1 is pointing out to us, John the Baptist still wasn’t equal to Jesus. In particular, in verse 8, we are told that John was not equal to the light.

So if John wasn’t equal to Jesus, the light, who was he? There is one description of John that is repeated at least 6 times in this chapter, and that is “the witness.” A witness is someone who has knowledge about a matter and is willing to give testimony about it. In particular, on this occasion we are told twice that John came to bear witness about the light. John wasn’t the light, but he came to bear witness about the light. I like to think of it like this.

John is like a mirror. Now if I get this mirror setup just right, I can shine a light upon you in almost the same way as if this mirror was the spotlight. But yet, this mirror isn’t the spotlight. The spotlight is up there. But the mirror is able to bear witness to the spotlight in such a way that the light is revealed by the mirror. In the same way, John is able to bear witness to the light so that it looks like the light is emanating from him. This is pretty hard! Perhaps that is why Jesus called him the GOAT? John ≠ light. And yet... John is able to bear witness to the light in such a way that he reflects the light to all around.

In case this one isn't really working for you, think of the sun and the moon. The moon is just a giant rock. It has no light bearing power in and of itself, but yet, there is a decent amount of light that we receive on earth during a full moon. Why? Because the moon is like this mirror; it reflects the true light—the sun. The moon, the mirror, John, are really nothing in and of themselves, but when they position themselves in the correct manner, when they are willing to bear witness to the light, it is as if they are the light themselves, shining into the darkness.

John ≠ light. John is just a witness to the light. And I want to suggest the same is true for us. You and I, like John ≠ light. Only Jesus is the true light. We are only witnesses to the light. But hang on, you might be thinking, I thought Jesus said elsewhere we are the light of the world? Well, yes, you're right, he did say that. In the sermon on the mount, Jesus said, "You are the light of the world." (Matthew 5:14 ESV)

So how am I ≠ light, and yet I = light of the world? How does that work? Well, I think it's the moon thing again. The moon is the light of the world at nighttime, when it's dark. But the moon isn't the light. It has no light bearing power in and of itself. The moon is simply reflecting the light of the sun. The sun is the light. In the same way, you, and I, are like the moon. We are not the light, but in the darkness of nighttime, we reflect the light, and we become the light of the world. We are the mirror, not the spotlight. We are the moon, not the sun. We are the light of the world, but we are not the light. Make sense?

And if this is true, then we have both the privilege and the responsibility to reflect the light of Jesus into this world. So what does that mean for us? I think two things... First, we must be present to Jesus. Second we must present to others.

First, we must be present to Jesus. You can't reflect the light unless you are in the light. I am reminded of the story of Moses, who lived hundreds of years before Jesus. Moses was the leader of the people of God and he met with God on a mountain. When he came down his face shone with the brightness of the glory of God. I believe that when we spend time in God's presence, the result is that we will naturally reflect the light.

In Moses' time, few people were allowed into the presence of God because of the presence of sin. And when they did go into God's presence it was after a large number of sacrifices and offerings. But when Jesus came, he took away the presence of sin from our lives, and he gave every single one of us the ability to spend time in the presence of God. But, I think, for many of us, we don't take God up on the incredible offer of spending time in his presence.

We are saturated as a culture with busy-ness, especially at this time of year, and it can be tempting to eek out every hour of every day to accomplish all that we want to. But I want to encourage you, even in this busy season, to take time to spend in God's presence. Call me old fashioned, but the most effective way I have found to do this is the quiet time. Every morning I get up and find a quiet place by myself, and I read my Bible and pray. I use the Bible in One Year app from Alpha, but there are so many resources out there!

This weekend we start the season of Advent. Traditionally, this is a season of preparation before Christmas when we prepare our hearts and lives for the coming of Jesus. Perhaps you could set this season aside, like those who have come before us, to spend time with God, praying, reading his Word and worshipping Him. And if you do, you will position yourself in the light. And without this, you won't be able to reflect the light.

So, first, we must be present to Jesus, and second, we must be present to others. In this season, I think there are many who are longing for light in their lives. Christmas can be a hard time of year for many people because it brings back painful memories—whether memories of a bad time, or memories of a good time that can never be relived because of death or separation. For many, Christmas can be a dark time of year. A time when many are longing for light... for hope; they are longing for light at the end of the tunnel.

And many of us are so desperate for people to be happy rather than sad that we try and cheer them up by saying things like "I'm sure it will get easier," or "God has a plan for you," or "God works all things together for good." We say some true, but frustratingly unhelpful piece of advice. Or maybe, even worse, we jump in to try and solve someone else's problem—something I seem to be very adept at doing. I think when we do this, we are acting as if we are the light, trying to shine in the darkness. We act like we are the sun, or we are the spotlight, or we are Jesus. Whether consciously, or not, we act as if we are the one who is going to bring hope to this person through our words of advice or wisdom.

The amazing thing about being the moon, rather than the sun, is that we don't actually have to offer any words of advice, or solve anyone's problem in order to bring light into the darkness. All we have to do is position ourselves in such a way that we reflect the light.

I remember when I first start doing hospital visitation, I got to train with our Deacon visitation team, who are truly amazing people. And I would ask each person I trained with, what was the most important to remember when visiting someone, and they all told me it was the same thing: your presence matters more than anything else. And it's true. We are so often afraid that we won't have the right words, or that we're going to give some trite comment like the one's I just mentioned, but the reality is that visiting people in hospital is simply a ministry of presence. It is literally like you are a mirror that just needs to position itself in such a way that you reflect the light of Jesus into the darkness of their situation.

I want to suggest to you that being present to people like this, is how we reflect the light. Doing it like this means you don't have to have the answers or the solutions to people's problems or struggles this Christmas. To be a witness to the light means you simply have to put yourself in a position where you reflect the light and hope of Jesus into their lives. It means to be more concerned about being present to people, than telling them what you think they need to hear. It means to be more concerned with directing attention towards Jesus, than towards yourself.

So, who this Christmas season might need you to reflect the light of Jesus into their lives? Who do you know who is in a dark place? Maybe because of sickness? Maybe because of grief? Maybe because of depression? Who in your life do you know that is longing for light at the end of the

tunnel? And how can you position yourself in such a way that you reflect the light of Jesus into their darkness? Not being worried about what you're going to say, but just being present. And when you are present, trusting that you will reflect the light of Jesus into the midst of their darkness, and that in so doing you will bring hope to their weary hearts.

So as we begin this Christmas season, let us remember that Jesus is the light in the darkness. He is the one who brings hope to those who need it this season. He is the one who can pull people out of the dark tunnel and into the light. And you and I are not the light. We are not equal to Jesus. But just like John the Baptist, we have a very important role to play. We are called to be the witness to the light. We are the moon to the sun. We are the mirror to the spotlight. We are the ones who are called to reflect the light of Jesus into the lives of those around us.

So this Advent, take time to be in the light. Take time to be in the presence of Jesus. And then take time to be present to others. Orient yourself to reflect the light of light to others.