



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Not the Lantern, But the Light”

John 1:6-9, II Corinthians 4:5-7

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I got to know him on the basketball court. Every Monday at noon, a group of local ministers would gather for pickup games at a church in Kingsport, Tennessee. I usually played point or shooting guard; he was a forward.

When the hour was done, we'd go our separate ways—me back to my Presbyterian church as an Associate Pastor, and him to his Pentecostal church in the same role. What happened at noon rarely had anything to do with the rest of our day.

So, I was surprised when he called one afternoon. He wanted to know if I'd like to join him for the closing worship service of a major Pentecostal Music Ministers' Conference. I can't even remember where it was—somewhere close enough that I could be in my own bed that night.

I don't know why he invited me. I'm not Pentecostal, and anyone who's heard me sing a hymn when I forget to mute my mic knows I'm no singer. But I was curious, and I said yes.

I'm glad I did.

The final worship service took place in a civic center and—I am not exaggerating—there were *thousands* of musicians in attendance. The sound of all those choirs, the rush of hearing everyone around me singing beautifully in parts- - it was stunning... thrilling! The music alone was worth the trip.



There were the prayers—some spoken, many sung, and yes, plenty in tongues. Thousands of people swaying, hands raised, praying in syllables I couldn't understand... yet I could feel the energy in it.

Then came the sermon. I'll admit, I wasn't expecting much from the preacher. I assumed Pentecostal worship was more about emotion than content. I'd come for the music and the experience, not the preaching.

But I was pleasantly surprised. The sermon, based on the passage I'll read from II Corinthians, was simple, powerful, well delivered and clear in making its point:

“Do not confuse the messenger with the message.”

The preacher urged that vast assembly of musicians to remember that their gifts—their talent, their technique, their performance—were not the point. They, themselves, were not the point. What mattered is that through them, God might be glorified; that the message of the music—not the messenger—would shine.

I invite you to listen to two passages explain how the line *“Do not confuse the messenger with the message,”* doesn't just apply to musicians, but applies to preachers, to church leaders, to all who say they follow Jesus.

John 1:6-9:

⁶ There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

II Corinthians 4:5-7

⁵ For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus's sake. ⁶ For it is the God who said, “Light will shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

⁷ But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.

“Do not confuse the messenger with the message.”

The Gospel of John makes this point about John the Baptist—a remarkable messenger in his own right. The Jewish historian, Josephus, writing around 93 AD, wrote more of John than Jesus. *“Crowds flocked to hear him,”* he wrote. The Baptizer's following was so great that Herod Antipas grew alarmed and eventually had him imprisoned and executed.

The Gospels praise John, but they also reframe his importance. They make sure those who hear their gospels read to them would see John as the messenger, not the message. As John's Gospel puts it: *“He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light.”*



Read between the lines. Can you hear that people are tempted to make John their object of devotion—

- to follow him anywhere,
- to believe whatever he said,
- maybe even to worship him?

When that happens—

- when the leader becomes the cause,
- when the personality becomes the point,
- when the messenger becomes the message—
someone needs to sound the alarm.

John's Gospel sounds it clearly:

Do not confuse the light with the lantern.
Call not the lantern the light.

The one essential fact about light is that it is separate from what bears it.

- The light of the sun isn't the sun itself.
- The light of a fire isn't the wood that burns.
- Even the glow from a candle or a bulb isn't the wax or the filament.

Paul echoes the same truth in his own way. He's not speaking of John, but of all of us who call ourselves Christians. *He is even speaking of every congregation.*

“We do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus as Lord... We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power to save is of God and does not come from us.”

We are not the flame—we are the candle.

We are not the light—we are the lantern.

That's worth thinking about as a congregation on *Commitment Sunday*.

Because on the surface, it can look like we're pledging to *keep the lantern polished*—to maintain what we can see and touch. And yes, we need to do what is practical and necessary.

- We maintain our buildings so that heat works, lights stay on, and water runs.
- We pay our staff—people we know and love by name.
- We fund programs so that our children, in safe and joyful spaces, can grow in faith and have a sense of belonging.



- We support mission partners who have addresses and budgets—the Presbyterian Community Center, Union Seminary, the hospital in San Juan—real places doing real work.

All of that matters. But none of it, by itself, is our message... our light.

Taken together, we might call it *the work and witness of Second Presbyterian Church*. But it's sobering to remember that churches sometimes can mistake the lantern for the light. They polish the brass, replace bulbs, tend the structure, and even entertain in worship—but dare not light the lantern too much, because it needs to be preserved. And in doing so, what is missed is the very purpose that justifies the lantern's existence: to shine a particular light. Or they bear a light that is not of God, bearing witness to messages that is of the darkness that Jesus came to overcome.

So, what is God's light?

Scripture calls it *glory*. And "glory," as the Bible describes it, is the real and living—yet unseen—presence and power of God.

Here, I'll show you light as an illustration of the light of God. I will hold my hands under this pulpit light, grab what's there, and lift it high enough so that even those in the back pews can see it. *"This is it—this shining! This is what I'm talking about."*

But of course, there is nothing there. I can't hold the light. None of us can. The most transformative, beautiful, reconciling, saving gift the church receives and passes along is of the Spirit—something that can only be seen in reflections. We can't contain or control it. But, when the light shines through us—when the words and life of Jesus take form in the life of this church—*that* is when glory becomes visible in what the light illumines.

Let me name just a few ways that light shines here at Second.

Sometimes that light shines **personally**.

In these pews—and among those joining us online—are people who have discovered that

- no matter how polished or unpolished their public image,
- no matter how long or short their list of accomplishments,
 - none of that determines God's love for them.

God's grace is the light that finds us, saves us, and holds us steady. Scripture calls it a rock, a fortress—because even what cannot be held can still hold us. *Glory!*

Sometimes the light shines **socially**.

It is the light of a different kingdom, a different realm. It is not the light of a social club or of any nation or party. It is the light of a community that shows its higher allegiance to God's will and ways.



As a colony of that kingdom, we are joined as sisters and brothers—not by sameness, but by our shared humanity in Christ.

And when—

- our love replaces ideology,
- our hope extends beyond borders,
- our goal is reconciliation,
 - and our compassion crosses race and class—
then the heart and behavior of Jesus are reflected in our own.
 - *Then the light shines! **Glory!***

And sometimes the light shines **prayerfully**.

The Quakers have a phrase for it: “**I am holding you in the light.**” That kind of prayer doesn’t presume to fix, solve, or control. It simply says, *I am placing you—your safety, your health, your worries, wounds, hopes, and life—into the light of God’s goodness and grace, trusting that God’s radiance surrounds what we cannot mend.*

Whenever this church prays that way, the light of Christ is shining. **Glory!**

So, our financial pledges are not just to keep the lantern on the shelf looking beautiful. Our pledges are to tend the lantern through which God’s glory can shine.

You’ve heard the old jokes about standing at heaven’s gate, having your life reviewed by St. Peter. In the spirit of Jesus’ parables, those jokes invite us to imagine what truly matters when seen in the light of heaven.

I’m not going to tell a joke—but let’s borrow the image for a moment. Suppose our whole congregation were standing at heaven’s gate together. What would make Peter smile?

Our facilities might bring a smile—not for their form and function- their beauty and capacity- on their own but for the worship, community, and service that take place within their walls.

Our programs might bring a smile—not for their cleverness or size, but for how they form disciples, nurture children, and serve our neighbors near and far.

Our budget and funds might bring a smile—not for the numbers on a page, but for the transformative ministries they support and the justice and peace they promote.

And our church directory might bring a smile—not as a list of names, but as a community of people who love God and long to let that love shine through them.

St. Peter smiles.

Better yet—*God smiles*—when the light of His Son shines through the lantern that is this church.

And as the light shines personally, socially, and prayerfully through this lantern called Second Presbyterian shine—it is not for our sake, but to reflect the glory of Christ in every corner of our lives.



Benediction

Go now as children of the Light —
to shine where there is shadow,
to give warmth where there is cold,
to reflect the love that has found you.
And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the steadfast love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
go with you and remain with you,
this day and always. Amen.

