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SUNDAY SCHEDULE AT FPC

Sunday School, 9:30 a.m.
Morning Worship, 10:45 a.m.
Evening Worship, 6:00 p.m.

The morning worship service
is available live online!

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TOWARD A BETTER FEAST

Rev. Davis Morgan, RUF Campus Minister
at the University of Southern Mississippi

In the movie *Tangled*, which is a retelling of the Rapunzel story, Rapunzel sits in her tower, locked away for her whole life, dreaming of the day when her life will begin. Each year on her birthday, Rapunzel sees floating lanterns in the sky. Rapunzel has no idea that she is in fact a princess and that the king and queen release the lanterns on her birthday, hoping they will guide her home. She does not know this but she has a sense that making a trip to see the lanterns will explain all of her big questions in life: questions of her own existence, her purpose, and the meaning of life, and in a way she's right. She sings *I've got a dream / I've got a dream / I just want to see the floating lanterns gleam.*

And Rapunzel believes that seeing the lanterns is not only going to be an experience that is well worth it, but that somehow it will help her to explain her own existence. And all of her adventures are bent toward that goal.

I want to suggest that all of us are like Rapunzel, gazing into the distance, pursuing some kind of floating lanterns. We live our lives in pursuit of *something*. I'm not saying you *should* or you *can*; I'm saying you *do* live this way. Our hearts are like arrows, always on a trajectory, moving toward a target. And that target is some version of what Jesus calls "having the light of life." James K. A. Smith, a Christian philosopher from Canada, says this:

"To be human is to be on a quest. To live is to be embarked on a kind of unconscious journey toward a destination of your dreams...It is less an ideal that we have ideas about and more a vision of 'the good life' that we

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desire. It is a picture of flourishing that we imagine in a visceral, often unarticulated way—a vague yet attractive sense of where we think true happiness is found.... To be human, we could say, is to desire the kingdom—some kingdomto pursue some vision of how the world ought to be... To be human is to be animated and oriented by some vision of the good life, some picture of what we think counts as 'flourishing'."

So, the question for us is "What is the good life? What is flourishing?" And what's shocking is that Jesus says, "I am." *I'm the kingdom. I'm the good life. And the way you find the good life – the light of life – is to follow me. In other words, Jesus' command to follow him is an invitation into the good life of the Kingdom.*

Confessing the darkness

The context of this passage is very important. Jesus is at a feast, called the Feast of Booths or the Feast of Tabernacles. And part of this feast was a ritual called the "Illumination of the Temple," where these four massive oil lamps – over seventy feet high – were lit over the temple. And that illumination was to commemorate the glory cloud of God in the Exodus story – the cloud that was God's presence with his people, that led them. And at night it turned into a giant cloud of fire, a pillar of light. It was the light of life, in other words – the light of God's presence.

Following that light meant *I'm warm. I'm safe. I'm protected. I'm guided. And I'm traveling toward the promised land.*

So, this is a huge celebration for Israel. And this is important: the flow seems to be that Jesus stands up and says this....**after the feast. Meaning, all the lights have been blown out. The party's over. The darkness has returned.** And Jesus says, "*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness.*"

That's a phrase that gets bandied around Christian circles a lot. *Y'all pray for her because she's really walking in darkness.* But what does that mean? **I want to suggest that it means living your life in pursuit of a counterfeit kingdom.** A counterfeit image of the good life. An image of flourishing that is something other than the cruciform kingdom of Jesus.

Think about waking up in the middle of the night – maybe you need a drink of water or you're cold and want to get an extra blanket or something – and it's pitch black. The way you feel navigating that room in the dark – literally walking in darkness. I've almost broken my ankle because my room's messy, there are shoes at the foot of the bed, or there's a stack of laundry I didn't put away, or a guitar case, or I knock over a picture frame. And your roommate wakes up because she can hear you bumping into things and going "ouch, ouch, ouch." But you don't want to turn on the light.

Here's the takeaway: outside of Jesus, that's a picture of our whole existence in miniature. It means pain and confusion. Why do I keep bumping into things that hurt me?

What does it feel like to be walking in darkness? Probably unsafe. Probably endangered. Probably fearful. Very often like you have to do something to get the good life for yourself. In that sense, you can surround yourself with spiritual content, with Christian music, with Christian reading material, with church activities, and with Christian friends, and be walking in darkness.

Why do I have all these incredible experiences and still feel empty inside? Why does my life look so full of joy on social media and yet I feel dead in my heart? Why am I surrounded by friends and admirers, but I feel lonely and alienated from myself all the time? Why am I the smartest person in the room, and still feel small and afraid? *It might be that we're walking in darkness.*

The Greatest Showman gives us words for this feeling – "all the shine of a thousand spotlights, all the stars we steal from the night sky, will never be enough." In other words, we might be following lights that don't last.

The reason we walk in darkness is that we follow counterfeit lights. And the counterfeit lights are parties that always come to an end.

Could it be that for you the path to joy starts with confessing: I am walking in darkness? Because here's the awesome news: you know what the hope of the gospel's about? "The people walking in darkness, have seen a great light"!

Following the Light

Once again, the reason we walk in darkness is that we follow counterfeit lights. And the counterfeit lights are feasts that always come to an end. The point is not for us to turn away from the idea of feasting, but to turn toward a better feast.

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined (Isaiah 25:6).

One of the reasons some of us have written Christianity off is that we've imbibed a false version of it that's full of stoic detachment and arbitrary legalism, that has completely lost sight of the God who Christians worship, who is at his core a God of boundless celebration and endless joy. The psalmist says it himself: "at your right hand are pleasures forevermore." Jesus is the Lord of the feast!

"It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures,

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fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.” C. S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory.”

And so, when Jesus says to us “Follow me and you’ll have the light of life,” that’s actually an invitation – a command – to enter into his good feast.

During the Christmas season, everybody’s been getting their Spotify Wrapped and finding out who the #1 artist they listened to this year was. And (somehow) mine was this recording artist named Taylor Swift. Taylor Swift has ruled the year 2023 in an insane way. Economists have started to use the phrase “The Taylor Swift Stimulus Package” to describe her impact. Her recent tour is projected to generate close to \$5 billion in consumer spending in the United States alone. One economist wrote “If Taylor Swift were an economy, she’d be bigger than 50 countries.”

What people have latched onto in Taylor’s world might well be described as a kingdom. A vision of flourishing and thriving. Of celebration and joy and peace. Of *shalom*. And if Taylor Swift can bring that kind of joy, that kind of hope that makes people say *I want to follow her*, how much more profound is the hope Jesus brings? How much more followable?

Jesus is the one who brings the true kingdom, the true celebration, the real feast. Every other feast comes to an end, but Jesus brings the shalom that never ends.

Conclusion

In *Les Miserables*, the character Cosette sings a song called “There is a Castle on a Cloud.”

*There is a castle on a cloud
I like to go there in my sleep
Aren't any floors for me to sweep
Not in my castle on a cloud*

*There is a lady all in white
Holds me and sings a lullaby
She's nice to see and she's soft to touch
She says, "Cosette, I love you very much"*

*I know a place where no one's lost
I know a place where no one cries
Crying at all is not allowed
Not in my castle on a cloud*

You know what that sounds like?

“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Revelation 21:4-5

Jesus is the one bringing the castle on a cloud, bought at the price of his own blood. He’s the one who brings the true feast, the true good life.

NEW OFFICERS

At the congregational meeting on December 10, these men were elected to serve as deacons in the Class of 2027:



Wes Bonner



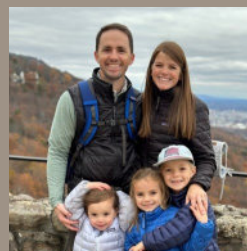
Ben Pace



Tommy Lofton



Rob Shillito



Lee Norman



Andres Tellez

These men were reelected to serve as deacons in the Class of 2027:

- Tony Claytor
- Kelly McMullan
- Quentin Parsons
- Rob Robertson
- Schaeffer Smith
- Trey Sutton
- Joseph Tullos

These men were reelected to serve as ruling elders:

- Bill Turpin, Class of 2024
- Bill Stanway, Class of 2025
- Arrington Rhett, Class of 2027

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS!



Bryon and Jennifer Kittler
with Sean, Savannah, and Sadie



Sam and Carissa Rosten
with Peter (6), Joseph (4), and Michael (3)



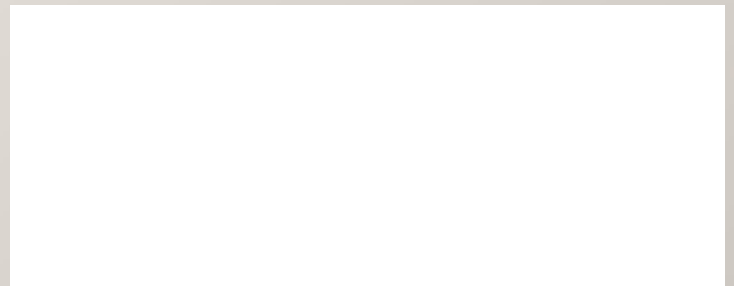
Liz Shamblin



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NEW COMMUNICANTS

These children were received into membership
on December 17!

Mary Neal Curry, daughter of Wes and Marion Curry
Evelyn McNease, daughter of Shea and Bethany McNease
Liza Morgan, daughter of Will and Haley Morgan
Clark Pace, son of Ben and Megan Pace
Drew Palermo, son of D and Kim Palermo

