

The Rev. John Sampson, Pastor
Glen Ridge Congregational Church

The Children of Light



Sunday, January 25, 2026
Matthew 4:12 – 23

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer.

Amen.

Today, we hear the story of Jesus calling the first disciples, the first people who will follow him on a new path, marked by love and justice. To follow Jesus is to be open to being transformed into something new, something maybe unexpected. It is a path that leads to different kinds of relationships, with people who we may never have been connected to before.

Jesus tells the first disciples, who were fisherman, that if they follow him on the path he is offering, they will no longer catch just fish - they will catch people. It's such a beautiful image for what they will become. But when I read this morning's passage I thought of another metaphor to describe what it means to follow Jesus. I think to follow the Christ means we become the children of light.

The passage opens by saying that with the coming of the Christ those who have lived in darkness, those who have lived in the valley of the shadow of death, have seen a great light. To follow Jesus is to welcome that light into our lives, to become that light in the world, to reflect it throughout our communities.

I think for many of us, we feel like we are living in a time of darkness, and in a valley touched by the presence of death. Look at what is happening in Minnesota. Currently there are between 2,000 and 3,000 ICE and Customs and Border Protection agents in just the cities of Minneapolis – St. Paul. The reason the federal government has said they were deployed was in response to widespread fraud, and immigration violations. But what has unfolded is something unlike what any of us have seen before. An American city occupied by federal forces, startling videos of citizens being harassed, bullied, arrested and jailed, the killing of Renee Good by agents in her car while her wife Becca looked on, the huge protests this weekend.

We look at what is happening in Minnesota and we can feel anger, confusion, disbelief. And the question I have been asked by many of you is, “What can I do?” To ask this question in a different way, from the perspective of our reading today, we might ask, “How can we be the children of light in these dark times?”

I think this is a question that has been raised with me since I started interviewing for the position of Minister of this church. I heard from the very beginning people expressing a desire for our church to be more present in a helpful and supportive way in our larger community. I’ve also heard people say that our church should be one of the moral voices of our town. But I am not sure we have a good sense of what this looks like exactly, and how we’re going to do this. I think it is a call to be more engaged and present than maybe the church has been in the past. To become the children of light, and recommit to being followers of Jesus in dark times, touched by the death of Renee Goode, may call us to transform ourselves to meet this moment.

Recently the UCC Conference Minister of the Minnesota Conference, the Rev. Dr. Tanya Sadagopan, was asked what people of our denomination could do to support the people of Minnesota and resist the darkness around us. She said we could do three things:

The first is to pray. For many of us the call to prayer in the face of the ongoing traumas of our nation has become a byword for doing nothing. But I think what Sadagopan is asking us to do is to recommit to our belief that prayer does have power, that God is listening, and that the arc of the moral universe will bend towards justice, even if it is a long journey to get there. Next Sunday, immediately after worship, we will host a special gathering here at the church to pray for peace in Minnesota, and in the other places around our nation, and the world which need God’s Spirit of peace. But Sadagopan doesn’t stop with prayer. She asks us to put our prayer into action.

The next thing Sadagopan invites us to do is to consider making a donation to the Minnesota Conference’s Emergency Fund, which can be used to support those impacted by the occupation of Minneapolis-St. Paul, and other communities. I have been in

conversation with Alicia, who is the head of our Ministry of Outreach and Mission, aka MOM, to see how our church can make a donation to support the people of Minnesota.

The third suggestion Sadagopan challenges us to consider is to act locally. We can't all be in Minnesota, but what is happening there is touching all of our communities, even Glen Ridge. My question to all of us is do we want to respond to her call? Do we want to respond to Jesus' call for us to recommit to being his followers, and become the children of light in these dark times? And if so, how? As someone new to our church, I am still trying to figure out how to answer these questions, and I think many of you are too. To help us get a better sense of where we might stand I am working with Alicia to create a brief survey to check in with all of you to see if you think we should be taking a stronger, more public stand, on the challenges facing our nation today, and if so, how you think we might do this. The survey will go out later this week, and I hope many of you will take the time to respond to it. It's going to help us better understand how the Christ might be calling us to transform ourselves in response to this moment.

These are three suggestions from our sister in Minnesota, which we are responding to. But we may come up with additional ideas, and that would be great if we did.

One last thing. On the bottom of the weekly eNews are links to the UCC, Central Atlantic Conference, and New Jersey Association websites. On these pages you can sign up to receive periodic updates from different levels of our church to see how we are collectively responding to the events around us, the prayers and reflections our church leaders are offering to give us hope and the spiritual food to nourish the light we carry within us.

I do believe, like many of you, that we live in dark times. But I also think that the light of Christ is shining around us, and through us. And as his followers, we are called to share this light with the world through our acts of prayer and good works.

So, I end this reflection, not with a quotation from the Bible, but with a quote from Lord of the Rings, by JRR Tolkien. It's an interchange between two characters as a great battle is about to occur.

"I wish it need not have happened in my time," said Frodo.

"So do I," said Gandalf, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

May we choose to truly be the children of light, the followers and disciples of the Christ.

Amen.