

BROOKE HICKS

John 1:5 ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it. For us, as followers and disciples of Jesus Christ, this should CHANGE everything about our lives. We SHOULD live in the light of what Jesus has done for us and what Jesus continues to do in our lives and in our world today.

Really John 1:5 is an INVITATION for us to step into this light - God's light. We must leave the darkness behind and live in God's light.

My name is Brooke Hicks, and I am a senior at Ardrey Kell high school. One of my passions is playing volleyball for both school and club. I have been a member at SMPC since I was little. My parents are Susan and Wyatt Hicks and Addison and Emery are my 2 other sisters.

The verse that was selected this year for youth Sunday is John chapter 1, verses 1-10. To my understanding, this verse explains how God's light brings healing, hope, justice, love, and guidance. It also describes how the darkness does not stand a chance against God's light. This verse motivates us to find that light to cut the darkness with, pushing us to leave the darkness behind and instead live in God's light. Not only does it encourage us to live in the midst of God's light and love, but it also calls us to make God's light evident within our world and in our relationships with others through our words and actions.

SMPC has allowed me to find and create my own light in the darkness. SMPC has also helped me understand what it means to share God's light with others. My mom has always been very involved in the church through things such as serving on various committees like the Mission and Outreach committee and serving as a deacon who provides pastoral care to others. Through her commitment and service to our church, it has set a positive example for my sisters and I about the light that the church can bring into your life and the light we are called to bring to

others through our service to the church and to the world. Her involvement in our church has also encouraged my sisters and I to get involved and share God's light with others.

In 8th grade, I went through confirmation and developed a close connection with my youth group peers that revealed the light of Christ to me as we were all going through the same Confirmation experience and striving to make sense of our faith and develop relationships with each other. But if I am being honest, there was a time before Confirmation during middle school youth group where developing relationships with each other was challenging and awkward and it felt sort of like I was going through a dark time in my life. When I first started attending youth group and Confirmation, everything seemed so awkward as I was scared to speak to others or answer easy bible questions. I felt discouraged as I had so much trouble conversing and connecting with others. Even though I experienced a dark patch attending youth group and Confirmation in my middle school years, my mom kept encouraging my sisters and I to keep attending and I am so glad I did. Being a part of this church family and being active in both children and youth programming here has made such a difference in my life of faith and it has resulted in some of the best relationships and experiences that I will carry with me even after I graduate. SMPC has provided me with the most valuable and meaningful relationships, experiences, and teachings that I could have ever asked for that have impacted my faith and shown me the light and love of Christ. For example, Mary Elledge being my Confirmation Mentor and for always supporting me both in and outside of church, Shelby Ullman who is a close family friend and mentor as well who has supported me both in my faith and outside of church at various volleyball games and my senior night, Lindsey being called to be the youth pastor here at SMPC and her constant support, love, and encouragement of me at my volleyball games and through experiences like applying to college and for making a difference in my faith and my understanding of God, for Rev. Matt Brown in teaching us more about stories contained within scripture every Sunday, for Dr. Whitney Bayer and Rebecca Guzman who have helped my sisters and I grow in our faith throughout the years, for Zach Bowyer who has been an amazing and lively youth choir director and bells director and for making it fun to learn how to sing

and ring bells and be involved in worship through music, for having mission experiences like making 800 sandwiches for men at Roof Above homeless shelter and caroling at Legacy Heights from the time I was little, for all of our Youth Mentors and chaperones over the years for imparting wisdom, faith, and love, especially Kelly Cushman and LeAnne Royster for being so committed to leading our high school BYG small group, for my parents for picking SMPC as our church home and for always encouraging us to be involved and learn and grow in our faith, and lastly for experiences like the High school beach trip and Montreat. I could not be more thankful and grateful for the people, places, and experiences that God and this church have provided me with and will carry the lessons of faith that have nurtured me from the time I was baptized to college next year and will strive to show everyone on my college campus the light and love of Christ, just as everyone within this church family has shown me so thank you all.

As I close, I want to especially thank Lindsay as she brought so much of God's light with her to SMPC and I am forever grateful for God guiding her here. She has helped me continue to spread god's light to younger youth, and she herself has lit up the SMPC youth program with excitement and energy. She has also created a place where all youth feel welcomed and loved, not only at youth group events, but also on the youth committee where we plan and execute youth group events and teachings. I am so glad that Lindsey encouraged me to apply and be a part of the youth committee and I would greatly encourage younger youth to become involved on this committee and get to know Lindsey as she is an amazing mentor, pastor, and friend.

Lastly, experiences such as Asheville youth mission trip during Confirmation, Massanetta middle school summer retreat, and Montreat high school retreat have provided invaluable and indescribable experiences for my faith and in what it means to make a difference within our world today. This church, children and youth ministry experiences, and retreat experiences have taught me how to make a difference within our world by shining our light and projecting the light and love of God and Jesus Christ that never fails and never goes out, through our words, our actions, our hearts and minds, and our mission work and service to our

neighbor's. At Advent, we focus on the light of Christ that comes to us through the birth of Jesus and one of the ways my family and I strives to know and experience the light of Christ during Advent is gathering around a table and reading the Advent Devotionals that Terry Gaines coordinates and that are written by various church members. But the reason I mention this tradition of my family and I during Advent is because the light of Christ does not just come to us during Advent but remains with us and guides us throughout our entire lifetime. For in our Scripture passage from John 1 verses 4-5, it reminds us that "what has come into being in Christ was life, and the life was the light of all people and Christ' light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it." As we go forward from worship this morning, it is my hope that you will experience the light of Christ all year round and begin to share the light and love of Christ with all whom you experience and come into contact with. If we live in the light of what Jesus has done for us and what Jesus continues to do within our lives and within our world today, it has the power to change our world from its broken state into something beautiful and a place where all God's people can thrive and live in peace and unity with each other, like God intends. So, I would challenge you all to live as people of Christ' light and share the light of Christ by loving everyone in the same way God loves each one of us. This is a daily call for us as God's people to experience and know the light of Christ and share it with others. And this can take shape in a variety of ways so go forth this day and always being inspired to share the light of Christ in all that you do. Amen.

CAMERON FRASER

Good Morning. My name is Cameron Fraser and I just recently graduated from Carmel Christian. I've been attending SMPC since I was born. I was baptized by Dr. Matt Brown in Mecklenburg Hall. My parents are Tonya and Jason Fraser, and Addison Fraser is my sister.

Our family joined SMPC back in 2006 and has found a home here at SMPC. We have found a home here because of the loving and supportive community of faith, children and youth group programming activities, retreat experiences such as

Montreat, the teaching and preaching of this church, the leaders of this church, and through youth choir and bells.

The verse that was selected this year for youth Sunday is John chapter 1, verses 1-10. The theme of this scripture passage is all about light. Not so long ago, we all experienced some darkness in our lives through Covid-19. The social distancing did not allow us to see each other face to face and grow and learn with one another. We could not attend church, were forced to go to school online, and did not have regular youth groups, making it hard to see some of my best friends that I have made at church.

But, recent moments in my high school years like the Beach Retreat with Lindsey and the rest of our youth group to North Myrtle Beach has helped me grow in my faith tremendously and grow closer to others in my youth group. The theme of the beach retreat was Salt and Light from Matthew 5:13-16. During this retreat, our teachings about God's light reminded me that God is our source of light and God illuminates the way ahead. Two verses that stood out to me from that retreat were Psalm 119:105, which says, "Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path" and John 8:12, which says, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." On the Sunday morning of our beach retreat, we had the opportunity to worship on the beach and it reminded me that God's light resides in each of us, and we are called to reflect God's light in our world. As disciples of Christ, we should not hide the light that is already at work in each of us. As Jesus' disciples, we are the light! Not only did God create the light of the world, but God also created the light that shines in all of us and showed us how to live in the light.

As followers of Christ, the metaphor of light and our scripture passage from John 1:1-10 teaches us that we are called to be beacons of light in all places where darkness triumphs over hope. One of the books titled, *When God Made Light* by Matthew Paul Turner, that Lindsey read to us on the retreat ends with a sleepy child peeking out of a tent, encouraging the reader to reflect God's light. The words it uses to close the book are: "Beam like the sun, glimmer like a star. And

wherever you go, the dark will stop being dark. Shimmer and shine, be a beacon so bright, cause when God made you, child, God made light.” These words are words that have stuck with me from the time of the retreat and words that have assured me that as I embark on the next chapter of my life at ECU, God’s light will lead me through, even in the darkest of times, and God will help me in sharing the light of Christ to everyone I encounter.

This is what God teaches us in John 1:1-10 that we, as Christ’ disciples, have a mission. Our mission is to let the light of Christ shine through our words and actions so that we can bring hope, healing, light, love, peace, and justice to our world. John 1:1-10 also reminds us that God is our constant light. God is our constant light guiding us through the darkest and most uncertain times, even if we do not see it at the time. Because my parents, church family, and youth group has always shown me the light of Christ, it is now our turn to project the light of Christ, especially as we enter this new phase of our lives. We must be Christ’ faithful disciples by walking in the path of God’s light and witnessing to it.

In closing, I would like to thank my parents for always supporting me and my mom for serving as my BYG small group leader, my youth group friends that I have made along my journey, my loving and supportive youth pastor Lindsey Odom, my youth choir and bells director of music Zach, the pastors, Dr. Matt Brown and Dr. Whitney Bayer, and the congregation here at SMPC for allowing this to become my church home and family and for always living out God’s light and love and teaching me how to do so. Thank you.

HANK JACOBUS

Be the light you wish to see in the world

Good Morning. My name is Hank Jacobus. I've been attending SMPC since I was born. I was baptized back in the old sanctuary in Mecklenburg Hall. I began attending Sunday School when I was 4, I've been in the youth choir since I was 13, and I've been on our Youth and Mission and Outreach Committees here since my freshman year. Many of the people here with me I've known for over 12 years,

some less than a year. Either way, they have had a huge impact on my everyday life and life of faith.

As many of you know I play baseball year-round. For a couple of months every year, I'm unable to come to church consistently because of baseball. During the season, I'm never able to attend youth group, I'll go weeks without hearing a sermon, and to Zach's annual disappointment, I have to take a step back from youth choir and bells. During this time darkness often takes over my faith as I push it to the side for seemingly more important, pressing things I'm going through. When I finish my baseball season, every year I return to youth group to receive the warmest welcome I could imagine and it feels like I did not miss a single week. Nobody understands how important and welcoming the simplest gestures are in bringing light to me and my faith. This congregation at SMPC has shown me the light and love of Christ from the time I was baptized through teaching me the stories of the gospel, modeling how Christ would want us to live, providing me with mission opportunities to serve the community of Charlotte, and loving and nurturing me in my faith so that I would come to know and experience God for myself. I've been blessed to be surrounded by a group of people who not only make me want to come to church but make me look forward to attending. A quote by Leon Morris says "A key aspect of light, it shines darkness flees. There is no such thing as a room so incredibly dark that flipping on a light won't work. It is the function of light to shine precisely in the darkness, to oppose darkness, to dispel darkness." I believe that God uses the light within my church family to shine upon me and my faith in times when there is darkness. This light feels contagious. When my faith is strong, I find myself communicating with God more. Because of the influence that SMPC has had on me and my faith, I strive to carry myself every day with God's light shining through me into our world filled with darkness. For this is what God calls us to do. Our scripture passage from the gospel of John 1:1-10 confirms this, as it instructs us, as Christ's followers to bear witness to the light and proclaim to others how God is light and in God, there is no darkness at all. The book of John does not just talk about shining light into the darkness, but also provides us with a command and piece of instruction, which is to carry this light into our broken and unjust world. John's gospel instructs us to walk in God's light

every day and share it through our words, actions, and very being. Going forward, I recognize that there will be darkness within our world and there will be times when our faith is not where we want it to be, but God is always with us. God walks alongside us on our journey of faith practicing light and love. This light brings hope, joy, kindness, and love into our world. To walk in this light goes beyond feeling these things for ourselves and working to create a world where all God's people can experience hope, justice, joy, kindness, and love. This is what spreading God's light into our world looks like - working to create a world where all God's people can flourish and live together experiencing God's light and unconditional love. Walking in the light of God is spreading hope, spreading joy, spreading kindness, and spreading love into the dark world around us all the time, every day.

In closing, I would like to thank this community of faith here at SMPC for reminding me of what it means to ignite the light and walk in the light of God's love. I would not have been able to become the person I am today if I had not been surrounded by an amazing church family like SMPC. So, thank you to everyone at SMPC, including Pastor Matt and Pastor Whitney, Rebecca, Zach who does an amazing job with youth choir and bells, my youth pastor, Lindsey, my friends who have been there for me every step of the way, and last but not least, my parents for picking SMPC as our church home and for nurturing me in a life of faith. As I go off to college next year, my hope is that I can continue to grow deeper in my walk with God and share God's light to all whom I encounter. Thank you.