

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany - 8am service only
Year A - 9/2/2020

Isaiah 58:1-9a
Psalm 112
1 Corinthians 2:1-13
Matthew 5:13-20

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

It's a bit of a contradictory Gospel passage we have presented to us this morning. Jesus is addressing his disciples, and the gathered crowd, amidst a long section of Matthew's Gospel all called "The Sermon on the Mount". We often think of it as just being the well-known section of the Beatitudes - "blessed are the poor, the meek, etc. - but in Matthew it's almost two whole chapters of combined teaching and wisdom.

And this morning, after Jesus talks about salt and light he goes on on to make this rather strange claim that he did not come to do away with the law; even though it seemed that most of his subsequent ministry was all about making things new and interpreting things differently.

But it is this image of salt and light that I want to concentrate on today. And might I begin by reminding you exactly what Jesus said in the opening verses. Because often I think we hear this passage as somehow being a command - *do* this; *be* that. But this is not a command - it is a promise. Because, actually Jesus isn't saying, "You *should* be the salt of the earth and light of the world." Or, "You *have* to be,..." and certainly not "You *better* be,...." Rather, he is saying, you are. As in you *already* are. Even if you don't know it. Even if you once knew it and forgot. Even if you have a hard time believing it.

"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under-foot. 'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden.'"

Jesus is making to his disciples a promise about their very being, he is not commanding them about what they should be doing. And that's worth turning over in our minds and hearts, as so often we and others in the world perceive God more like a divine law-maker and rule-enforcer than generous gift-giver.

And because we experience God that way - always setting expectations that we can rarely live up to, we tend not to find as much inspiration and energy in our worship experience and faith lives as we might hope, because we are always beating ourselves up about not being good enough - as if that's what God wants from us in our lives of faith...

But today, Jesus affirms you. In the Beatitudes, during the opening part of this sermon on the mount, Jesus offered blessing and affirmation for those who find themselves excluded, reviled, poor, and hungry. In the same way, Jesus now offers this blessing and affirmation, and gift to us all - You *are* the salt of the earth. You *are* the light of the world.

This is sheer blessing - simply grace. And it is about identity, about the ongoing theme of epiphany and revelation which pervades this season, and it goes to the very heart of our very being, which in turn leads to doing. But before getting there, let's stay with this notion of promise.

I invite you to look deeply into your lives over the last couple of weeks and think of the variety of ways God has used you to be salt and light. Your words of encouragement to others. Your faithful work at your places of employment. The volunteering you've done. The prayers you've offered, the love you have shared, or the promises you've made and kept.

I know that many of you have lives that are anything but straightforward and simple. Many of you have multiple demands that compete for your time and your energy and your attention. And some of these demands seem very far from or quite separate from a life of faith.

But I wonder, when we think about them honestly, whether we might not be able to see ourselves as being salt and light in all of those different situations - mundane, mediocre, or boring though they might be. Yes, any of these things may seem, in and of themselves, small. But please don't forget: small is what God most often uses to change the world.

Once we begin to believe that we are salt and light - not simply becoming, or hoping to be, but actually *are* - then we can encourage each other to continue to be salt and light, letting our light shine so that people will see our good works and give thanksgiving and glory to God.

And that matters, because if ever there was a time when our world needed to be blessed with the gifts of salt and light it's right now. Check the headlines; listen to the news; glance over the social media pages - there is an unusually pervasive sense of dis-ease in this country and most certainly in our world. Which is why we need to be reminded that we are salt and light and to let that light shine all the brighter.

Let me give you a current example of what I am trying to describe here. You will all know about the recent devastating bushfires in our state, and around the nation. Some of you may even have been touched more personally by the traumatic nature of these disasters. Well, during the week I read an article which covered the work of a number of Emergency Chaplains, who have, basically since the event, been present with people in need.

They have no set agenda. They do not have a job description, and they have no idea what their day will bring or how it will unfold. They are there, often in the emergency evacuation centres, or in the town centres around the place, simply, as a presence. For the most part they are just there, but always ready to step in quietly as one person becomes overwhelmed with grief, just offering a shoulder and a word of comfort. Or they are engaged in conversation by the person who asks the question "why did God let this happen?"

Or they say a prayer with someone who comes over, admits they have never been to church, but they just feel as though they want to pray for this situation but don't know how. And this article stated how these Chaplains, just by their being there, were doing incredible work.

Now some of these emergency chaplains are ordained ministers in their own tradition. But many are not. Many are faithful people, many like you yourselves, who have secular jobs normally, but who respond in situations like bushfires, scenes of road trauma, or gun violence. And they are just there. They are salt and light to grieving, suffering, confused, and often angry people.

And that is precisely what Jesus is saying today - this is *all* of our ministry too - in everyday situations we are that salt and light to others;

We are blessed. We are salt and light - already! And what's more, God is not done with us yet, and God will continue to bless the world through our prayers, words, and deeds as Jesus' faithful disciples. Jesus is making promises today, and we are all about to be changed by them.

That is the hope and the message of this season of Epiphany, and as we prepare soon to enter the time of Lent we would do well to remember this message, as it gives us heart and hope to move forward.

In the name of God. Amen.