

“Salt and Light”

Isaiah 58:1-12 • Psalm 112:1-9 • 1 Corinthians 2:1-12 • Matthew 5:13-20

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Mason, Michigan

February 5, 2023

5th Sunday after Epiphany

Salt and light. That seasoning you use on many foods; that brightness that illumines the darkness. Two of the oldest and most essential things known to humankind. Both of them have been extremely important to people of every generation for pretty much all of recorded history; both of them were used by Jesus as metaphors to describe his followers. To describe *us*.

We are in Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount. He begins with the Beatitudes, that series of blessings that we talked about last week. When he moves into his actual teaching, the first things he says are these: “You are the salt of the earth,” and “you are the light of the world.” What does he mean?

Let’s start with salt. A mineral, formally known as sodium chloride, naturally present in seawater; it can also be found in crystalline form within sedimentary rocks, resulting from the evaporation of seawater. It is present in abundant quantities in the Holy Land, especially around the Dead Sea, which is nearly ten times more salty than the ocean. It is one of the saltiest bodies of water on the planet. It is so salty that fish and plants cannot live in it, and there are large salt deposits along much of its shoreline. If you recall the story about Lot’s wife – they were fleeing the city of Sodom, which was located somewhere near the Dead Sea – and Lot’s wife “looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.” (Genesis 19:26) Tradition has it that Lot’s wife is *this* pillar of salt, which is situated on a hill along the southwestern part of the Dead Sea. That entire hill is mostly comprised of salt, capped by a layer of limestone and clay. There has never been any shortage of salt in the Holy Land.

Salt was used, of course, as a food seasoning; it is, in fact, one of the oldest and most common food seasonings. It can make even highly unpalatable foods taste better. In the book of Job, Job asks this rhetorical question: “Can that which is tasteless be eaten without salt?” (Job 6:6) Salt was also a preservative; for thousands upon thousands of years before the refrigerator was invented, salt was the best way to preserve food, especially meat. Salt made it possible for humans to be less dependent upon the turning of the seasons to acquire sufficient food, and salt made it possible for food to be transported over long distances. Salt thus was of enormous value to the ancient Jews, Greeks, and Romans, and to many other peoples as well. It was not something that civilizations took for granted. Some of the earliest roads were built for the primary purpose of transporting salt to people living in regions where salt was in short supply. In the Bible, there are several references to a place called “the Valley of Salt” (2 Sam. 8:13; 2 Kings 14:7; 1 Chron. 18:12; 2 Chron. 25:11; Ps. 60:1), and a small city called Nibshan was also known as “the City of Salt.” (Joshua 15:62) In the book of Leviticus, the Israelites were instructed to season all their grain offerings with salt (Leviticus 2:13). There are even a couple references to “a covenant of salt” that God had with the people of Israel (Num. 18:19; 2 Chron. 13:15; cf. Lev. 2:13). Bottom line: salt was *incredibly* precious to the Israelites – and it was in abundant supply.

So when Jesus said to the crowd of people gathered around him, “You are the salt of the earth,” he was making reference to something that they all would have known was *vital* for their daily living. Salt was as essential to their lives as the air they breathed. They depended upon salt as a basic necessity of life. But by telling them that *they* were salt – well, that was something new. You can imagine some of them scratching their heads. “*We’re* not salt. *I’m* not salt.” Except, Jesus says: yes, *you are*. You are the salt of the earth. You are as essential for human existence as that precious commodity. Your job is to *season* the earth. To *improve* the earth. To make it *better*. And your job is to *preserve* the earth. To help make it *last*, to help it *endure* the elements, and the ravages of time and extreme conditions. You have a *job* to do. Your job is to make this world *better*, and help it to *last*.

“But,” he continued, “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.” There comes a point where salt no longer does what it is intended to do. It no longer seasons; it no longer preserves. When that happens – well, there’s not much point in keeping that salt around, is there? The implication is as stark as it is clear: *if your life isn’t helping to season the earth, to improve the earth, to make this world a better place for everyone else* – well, are you doing the *job* that Jesus wants you to *do*? Are you following God’s *call*?

Next he says this: “You are the light of the world.” Modern scientists would tell us that light is a form of electromagnetic radiation that can be perceived by the human eye. The ancients didn’t have a definition like that. They just knew that light was essential for being able to *see* things. The sun was, of course, the primary source of light. Another essential source was fire, like the flame of a candle, or a burning campfire. Both of those sources of light also had the secondary benefit of providing *heat*. The moon and the stars also provide some additional light, although nowadays we understand that the moon merely reflects the light from the sun, and does not generate any light of its own. Today we have many other sources of light, thanks to electricity and power systems; everything from ceiling lights to streetlamps to the flashlight on your smartphone to the little illuminated lights on many of your other electric devices. It’s hard for us to imagine a world in which we would be dependent on things like candles and firepits to provide lights in our homes, especially in these long winter nights.

It’s harder still to imagine a world with no light at all. Imagine if we didn’t have the light from the sun, or the light from anything that burns, or the light of any electric device. Like the far side of the moon, bathed in darkness all the time. Could we survive in a world without light? Can *anything*?

Jews in the time of Jesus believed that light was the very first thing God had created: “Let there be light.” (Gen. 1:3) Because of its immense power and importance, light also symbolized God, as when Isaiah declared, “the Lord will be your everlasting light.” (Isa. 60:19-20) The Psalmist also referred to God’s word as “a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” (Ps. 119:105) Isaiah also called God’s chosen servant – whom we understand to be Jesus – “a light to the nations.” (Isa. 42:6; 49:6)

So when Jesus said to the crowd of people gathered around him, “You are the light of the world,” he was again making reference to something that they all would have known was *vital* for their daily living. He was also telling them something that had never been told to them before: *they* – the followers of Jesus – are as essential to the well-being of the world as light itself is. To refer to *God* as light, or to *God’s chosen servant* as light, or even to *God’s word* as light – that was one thing. To refer to this ragamuffin band of common people, none of them famous or important in the eyes of the world, as “the light of the world” – that was something *entirely* different. It elevated these people; it gave them an identity, a sense of purpose, a feeling of *importance*, that they probably never had before.

“You are the light of the world.” *You* are as essential to this world as that bright shining sun in

the sky. Those of us in Michigan know well what's like on those dark, dreary days of winter when the sun doesn't shine, and how utterly *refreshing* and *rejuvenating* it feels when we can see our shadows again, when we can feel the warmth of the sun on our skin again; how much *energy* and *hope* it gives us. That's the same effect that *we* – the followers of Jesus – should have on the world. We are called to be rays of sunshine, beacons of hope, for a world that is worn and tattered and too often in despair.

Jesus calls us to be “a city on a hill.” – that was how John Winthrop described his vision for the Puritan colony that was about to be founded on Massachusetts Bay, back in 1630. That vision has been referred to countless times, by John F. Kennedy, and Ronald Reagan, and Barack Obama, and various other political figures through the years, to symbolize the dream of America; hopefully all of them are aware that Winthrop was quoting Jesus: “You are the light of the world. A city built upon a hill cannot be hid.” Jesus wasn't talking about a nation; he was talking about his followers, about *Christians*, all of them, all of *us*; all those who hold to the values and principles that Jesus taught and embodied. We have a job to do: a job to be *light* for the world. Rays of sunshine, beacons of hope.

But what if we fail to do that job? What if we don't shine our light with the world? “People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.” Light is *essential* for human well-being. *Why hide it?* Why would anyone want to hide the light of Jesus? “In the same way,” Jesus continued, “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” You have so much to offer; you have so much *hope* and *joy* and *peace* you can bring to this world, because you embody Jesus, because you are filled with the Holy Spirit – don't you *dare* hide that from the world! Later in his sermon, Jesus will stress that we shouldn't be boastful or prideful; the goal isn't to draw attention to *ourselves*; the goal, rather, is to take what Jesus offers, and *share it with the world*, so that *everyone* can bathe in that marvelous light. But that won't happen if people like you and me cover the light under a basket. Do your friends and co-workers and acquaintances know that you are a Christian? Or do you prefer to keep that detail hidden? I know it can sometimes lead to awkward conversations. When people ask me what I do for a living, I sometimes want to avoid the question; I never know how people are going to respond. It tends to lead either to excitement, or to people unloading all their personal problems on me so they can get my advice, or to people wanting to avoid me like the plague!

We can't control how other people are going to react to us, when they find out that we're a Christian, that we actually *believe* this stuff about Jesus, and try to live our lives by it. We have no way to know what may have happened in other people's lives that is going to make them either receptive to who we are – or repulsed by it. The unfortunate reality is that far too many Christians have done an awful lot of harm. Some churches spew hatred in the name of Jesus. Some priests and pastors molest adult parishioners, or youths, or children. Some Christians refuse to let the Gospel penetrate their lives, and just keep on living the same way they did before. Some become closed-minded, refusing to listen to anybody who is different from them, or to the findings of modern science. In our country today more people are turning away from Christianity than turning towards it – and in large part, that's because we have failed to do what Jesus asks us to do. We have failed to put our light on a lampstand and let it give light to *all* in the house. We have failed to be the light of the world.

Maybe our salt has lost its flavor. But it's not too late. It's *never* too late. As long as we put Jesus at the center of our lives, as long as we take our grounding and our guidance from him, as long as we let the Holy Spirit into our hearts, letting *it* tell us what to do with our time and energy and resources, it's never too late. We can yet be the salt of the earth. We can yet be the light of the world.

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