

Epiphany 5, Year A
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St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
February 5, 2023
Isaiah 58:1-9a(9b-12)
Psalm 112:1-9(10)
1 Corinthians 2:1-12(13-16)
Matthew 5:13-20

Salt and Light

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

What does that mean?

Today we pick up where we left off in last Sunday's gospel. Jesus is delivering the sermon on the mount. He is speaking to his disciples, the people he has called to follow him who are following him. He is speaking to them and to us.

You are the salt of the earth.

The last time we encountered a saying about salt, I spent some time talking about salt's properties, qualities, and uses: it's a flavor enhancer; it's a preservative; it's valuable. Too much of it is dangerous, but too little of it turns something exquisite into something bland.

All those things are still true. Today, however, I find I am drawn to the last part of the sentence, the prepositional phrase at the end: *of the earth*. The salt that enhances, preserves, adds value everywhere, not just in the immediate vicinity.

And the same with the second saying:

You are the light of the world. The light that permeates the planet not just the spot where we are.

How is this possible?

Because I am not salt and light by myself, and you are not salt and life by yourself. The Jesus movement is not about individualism but about community.

Yes, it's true, living in community is a lot harder than just making sure our individual needs are met. But living in community—with God, with one another, with the planet, and with ourselves—is what we are called to.

And yes, it's true, many iterations and flavors of Christianity have drawn back from the communal nature of this call and made it all about the individual: individual salvation, individual fire insurance policies against hellfire, individual vices that need to be eradicated, and on and on.

Jesus, however, is not about *me* but about *we*. And this communal call manifests itself all over the place.

On Sundays we recite together the Nicene Creed. In the daily office we find the Apostles' Creed, which is older and briefer and first-person singular: I believe....

On Sundays we recite the Nicene Creed. We stand and say together, *We believe in one God....*

More than one author has observed that in a world so often focused on *me, me, me*, one of the most countercultural things we do as an assembly of Jesus followers is declare together *We believe*.

But it isn't only the creed that's we not me.

After the creed we offer our collective prayers, the Prayers of the People, not the prayers of _____ "your name here." Not just my prayers or your prayers but *our* prayers.

And then we confess our sins against God and our neighbor, collectively: *Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you....*

And in the eucharistic prayer, *we offer our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.*

And the post-communion prayer is a *we* prayer, too.

And after all of it, *we* go forth in the name of Christ.

We together go out to be salt and light because we together are salt of the earth and light of the world in the company of Jesus the Christ and one another. Still though, what does that mean?

Today's first reading from Isaiah tells us the kind of activity that God desires after telling us the kind of activity that God does not value.

What God wants, Isaiah says, what God desires is movement toward wholeness for everyone, including and especially for the oppressed, the hungry, the homeless, the naked. If we are about the work of caring for those folks, the prophet declares, then when we call upon God, when we cry for help, God will hear us and answer us, saying, *Here I am. I'm right here 'cause you're right here.*

God is close to those in need, to those who are struggling. Therefore, if we are close to them as well—and when we are them as well—we will be near to God. It will be easier perhaps for us to hear God and for God to hear us.

It's possible to read the Isaiah passage and the Matthew passage with this great big order to be salt and light and to conclude that, well, we simply aren't doing enough. But please hear this: neither Isaiah nor Matthew is saying work harder. That's not the message.

Both Isaiah and Matthew are telling us that God's righteousness, God's right relating, can be seen in the arc of human history. Both of them are inviting us to *do righteousness*, which we can understand as getting on board with what God is doing.

The metric is not perfection, as in never making mistakes. The metric is participation: how am I, how are you, how are we participating in God's work in the world?

It's possible that we can't always know to what extent we are participating in God's work. There are some hints. The reality, however, is that much of what is happening in and with and through God is not immediately discernible. That doesn't mean it's not real; it means it's a mystery.

And mystery is what Paul, our patron, is talking about in the second reading from 1 Corinthians. Many dimensions of our culture teach us that mystery is something to be solved, to be explained, accounted for, explained away. I myself love a good murder mystery, a satisfying British police procedural drama most of all.

The mystery of God, though, is not a case to be solved but a reality to be experienced.

Week by week in our life together we encounter the mystery of God. This can take many forms. Some of these forms are quite familiar, nevertheless mysterious. We call them sacraments.

Our word *sacrament* in English comes from the Latin *sacramentum*. This Latin is a rendering of the Greek word *mysterion*, meaning “mystery.”

The sacraments are mysteries, holy mysteries, outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace. We are invited into them, as initiates in these mysteries, as baptized people who are followers of Jesus the Christ. And empowered by the grace of these sacraments, we are salt and light: of the earth, in the world: our witness points to God’s presence and goodness even in apparently inconsequential things.

The sacraments are mysteries, and the point of such mysteries is that they are to be embodied, not explained. We are people of the incarnation, so we incarnate this great mystery that is light, that is Love, that is God, and we bear it into the world.

As we embody the sacrament we will soon participate in once more, the mystery of the Holy Eucharist, we see what it means to be salt and light everywhere we go and in everything we do. In this sacrament, we behold what we are and become what we receive, which is the body of Christ broken and given for the world. May we behold what we are; may we become what we receive.