



St. Luke's East Hampton

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Benjamin Shambaugh

February 8, 2026; Epiph5A:

[Isaiah 58:1-12](#); [1 Corinthians 2:1-12, \[13-16\]](#); [Matthew 5:13-20](#)

Last week, I talked about learning about preaching in seminary. A frequent question when I bring this up is if I could preach a sermon on a specific topic. In the Episcopal Church and in the Roman Catholic and mainline Protestant churches there isn't as much of an opportunity to do that as you might think. Our worship themes are set by a Liturgical calendar and our scriptural texts for Sundays are assigned in what is called a Lectionary, a cycle of Old Testament, New Testament, and Gospel readings which covers most of the Bible in three years. The Lectionary is good in that it forces us to hear and reflect on passages we might not choose ourselves. Sometimes the appointed lectionary readings feel a bit clunky. Sometimes, however, they fit perfectly with issues of the day – something that has been very evident in recent weeks, and is particularly clear this morning.

The great German theologian Karl Barth taught that a preacher should preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other, the idea being to help people apply the readings of the day to their own lives and the world they live. If you combine this with the adage that the task of the preacher is “to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable,” you could say that the goal of a sermon is to help people apply the scriptural story to their story and change their lives and their world as a result. With readings like the ones we just heard, preachers don’t have to say very much at all. In fact, they can just let the scriptures speak for themselves.

Isaiah was writing to a people and a nation who were proud of their religiosity, but had forgotten what their religion and their God were all about. Isaiah repeats the message we heard from Micah last week. God doesn’t care about fasting, prayer breakfasts or persistent public proclamations of piety. God wants a faith that is real and a faith that is lived. God asks, “Is not this the fast that I choose: to lose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?” This passage goes on to describe the positive outcomes of doing these things. “If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.” Repairers of the breach, the restorers of streets to live in: that is a righteous goal. That who God is calling us to be.

If readings like those from Isaiah or Jesus sound like a political platform, remember that it's far more likely that these scriptures inspired that platform, rather than the other way around. These ideas go back thousands of years. Consider for example the Biblical instructions having to do with welcoming the stranger and offering hospitality to immigrants and refugees. In chapter 19, Leviticus commands us to treat foreigners living among us if they were native born citizens. In chapter 20, Leviticus puts caring for foreigners as part of the Ten Commandments themselves. The Bible is full of other passages that repeat this theme. Treating immigrants, people of color, and people from different backgrounds and places with dignity isn't new or radical or unChristian. What is new and radical is not part of our Judeo-Christian heritage is the way they are being treated - often by so-called Christians - today. These actions need to be condemned.

In this morning's gospel, Jesus told his followers that they were the salt of the earth. He then warns that if salt has lost its flavor, it isn't any good. In a recent post, theologian Andrew Thayer, dug into what Jesus meant. Salt was very valuable in the ancient world. People were "worth their salt." As the word "salary" reminds us, people were even paid in salt. And, as anyone who went through a High School Chemistry class or anyone who has added too much salt to a recipe knows, salt never loses its taste. In Jesus' day, salt never lost its taste unless it was diluted, stretched or cut with other materials in order to cheat people out of their pay. (The fact that Jesus used this as a metaphor suggests that it was a common practice.) Salt that has lost its saltiness is salt that has been mixed with so many additives that it was no longer good for anything.

Jesus told his followers they were salt. He knew that, like salt, faith can be a preservative, can bring healing and add zest and flavor to life. Jesus also knew that faith diluted by distractions isn't worth very much. Jesus tells us to avoid that by actively fighting over darkness. You can't compete in the Olympics or play in the superbowl by sitting on a couch. We can't stop things like racism or antisemitism, end corruption or expose child abuse by praying to end them but not standing up and working to make them happen ourselves. As Jesus told us a few minutes ago, we "are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." Light, you may remember, is both a wave and a particle. Individuals matter. Individual actions make a difference. Individuals working together create a tidal wave that can transform the world, not just winning the gold but overcoming evil with good. Our light shines when we live as a people and a community of character, when we practice courage and compassion, when we hold the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other and comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Our light shines when we become repairers of the breach. That is what God is calling us to do, that is what God is calling us to be, today.