

Worship for February 5, 2023

Prelude

Welcome and Announcements

*Call to Worship Psalm 147

How good it is to sing praises to our God.

For God is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting.

God heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds.

God is our Lord, and abundant in power.

God's understanding is beyond measure.

*Hymn 744 Arise, Your Light Is Come!

Call to Confession

Isaiah exclaims, "Have you not seen? Have you not heard? "The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. God does not faint or grow weary," but comes to us to renew our strength and restore us to right relationship with God and others.

Prayer

O God, our creator, redeemer, and sustainer, we confess our feelings of anxiety and uncertainty brought on by a continuing pandemic, extreme weather events, acts of senseless violence, and other threats. We look for help, but, sometimes it seems you are far away. Remind us that you are present to us, and to all your vulnerable children, to comfort and to bless in times of suffering and need. Renew our strength and restore our joy that we might mount up with wings like eagles to carry out each day's purpose. Amen.

*Hymn 698 Take, O Take Me As I Am

Assurance of Pardon

The God who fashioned the stars and the moon has come close to each of us with mercy and love. Hear the good news of the gospel: We are forgiven and freed to run and not be weary, to walk and not faint. Know you are forgiven and be at peace.

Old Testament Reading Isaiah 58:1-12

Time With Our Young Disciples

Gospel Reading Matthew 5:13-20

The Morning Message

Today we continue to explore the Sermon on the Mount, according to the Gospel of Matthew, that we began last week. Again, the words are beautiful and familiar and we may know certain phrases by heart. The hazard of that can be that they are so familiar we barely hear them anymore. But, sometimes we will hear or experience them in a new way which adds to our understanding.

So, that's where I hope to lead us this morning. Because I had some unplanned moments of clarity related to this text, regarding salt and light, this week. We'll get to that shortly.

One of my favorite authors is Ruth Everhart. Ruth is a Presbyterian minister, my age in fact, who grew up in the Reformed Church, one of our Formula of Agreement Churches, in the Midwest. Her father was a pastor, too. Ruth went to a church-related college and was a good and happy student until the night a serial rapist broke into the home she shared with several other female students and brutally assaulted them. Ruth wrote a book about her recovery from that experience called, *Ruined*, which was named "book of the year" by *Christianity Today*.

That experience has led her to be an advocate for the rights of women and girls, particularly on issues involving sexual assault and its fallout. She participated in the Women's March of 2017 in Washington, DC. She wrote a reflection of that day which I would like to share with you:

During an election cycle we citizens become familiar with stump speeches. These are the points that candidates repeat at every campaign stop. If the speakers are particularly adept, the refrains they use will echo even after they have moved on to the next stop. Indeed, certain phrases become associated with a particular face and voice and agenda, so that even fragments of the speech will call to mind the candidate's entire platform.

The Sermon On the Mount is Jesus' stump speech, if you will, and the Beatitudes are nine refrains that echo long after Jesus has moved on. Picture the "blessed are" statements on placards, borne aloft in the sea of faces around Jesus. These fragments form the context about salt and light-which seem simple enough to be campaign slogans, but are followed up with the confounding exhortation about righteousness: "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Righteousness and blessing are the bookends to the Salt and Light passage.

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

Not, "You *will be* the salt of the earth or you *will be* the light of the world."

You are now, and here, salt and light.

Who is Jesus addressing? Who is the salt of the earth? Those who are humble, those who mourn, those who are meek, and those who thirst after doing what is right.

Salt creates thirst, does it not? The righteous are blessed to thirst after doing what is right. They are salty and so they thirst.

And who is Jesus calling the light of the world? Those who are merciful, those who are pure in heart, those who are peacemakers, and those who receive abuse for standing up for what is right. Righteousness is a form of light, is it not? The righteous are blessed to show forth purity and peace as they stand up for what is right. They shed light through their actions.

Remember Ruth Everhart penned these words in 2017, but, they are still relevant, I think. She continues:

Stump speeches may seem a sour topic right now, a far cry from the gospel and its good news. Our nation is in the midst of a particularly contentious political season, one shedding more heat than light. You might even say we're embroiled in this season. Perhaps the word "embroiled" tickles my fancy because something embroiled begs for seasoning, it begs for salt. And surely it makes us thirsty to do what is right.

Perhaps the most difficult part of this passage is that it cycles us back to righteousness, which we understand in the abstract, but struggle with in the particulars.

Any disciple *worth her salt* knows that righteousness is the goal. It forms our *telos*-that thing we drive toward. But how will keeping the Pharisaic law drive us toward righteousness? Jesus does not elaborate.

The answer must be found in salt and light, these elemental things that are so multifaceted. Even though they are simple, there is nothing innocuous about either element.

Salt preserves. Salt flavors. But salt can also sting and burn and abrade. Light dispels darkness. Light sheds illumination. But light can also blind, either temporarily or permanently.

Christians want to be salt and light, but we struggle to know how and when, and to what extent. Take, for example, our recent political theater...which brought on the Women's March in Washington, with sister marches around the country, and indeed the globe.

For some marchers, this was a way to be salt and light, while for others, the marchers were nothing but abrasive.

So, should we spend more time talking about being salt and light, or more time marching and clarifying the messages we carry? Which is easier for our churches to do? Which is a more direct response to the times we find ourselves in?

Would Jesus have marched? Would Jesus have blessed the marchers? (Let's think metaphorically about marches and marching. It could be a protest or intervention of some other type. The important part is to be moved to action.)

How does the gospel improve the flavor of our life together-as followers of Jesus, as congregations, as a nation? What if we weren't afraid of the sting of salt?

What if we spent less time arguing about the design of our lampstands- as really, so much Christian talk amounts to-and spent more time shedding light on the darkness that surrounds us? If you intend to be salty, well-lit disciple, be advised to re-read Jesus' stump speech. The waving placards of "Blessed are" might seem quite inspiring until you realize Jesus actually means business. This righteousness is not for the faint of heart. What Jesus has in mind might be stinging, blinding righteousness!

I mentioned that I heard, or experienced, this text in a new way recently. Most of you are aware that I've been waiting to have cataract surgery. It was scheduled, then cancelled because the doctor got sick. It's back on the calendar for April. Anyway, because so much time has lapsed between evaluations, I had to go through that process again last week. For such an exam, the doctor requires his patients to go without eye makeup for 48 hours. I've talked about this before. I'm vain. I don't like this rule. So, after my eyes had been dilated and examined and dates set for surgery, I went out into the morning sunlight. It was not a particularly bright day, but, I could barely open my eyes without sunglasses. Never-the-less, because I had to run some errands before going home, I pulled out my make-up bag and applied some eyeliner and mascara to make myself more presentable. Or, I tried anyway. Like I said, I could barely see when I took off my sunglasses.

I ran those errands and made it home a couple of hours later. When I walked into the bathroom, the face looking back at me from the mirror looked like someone had applied magic marker to my eyes then I had fallen asleep with my face in a pillow. Pretty frightful.

Light can be enormously revealing and it isn't always pretty. In fact, light can reveal a world of pain and injustice. But, the only way to overcome what is unsightly, what is disturbing, what is not right, is to throw on the light.

And then there is the matter of salt. We bought a new set of knives awhile back. I was using one to slice an orange and underestimated how much pressure I had to exert. They are very sharp. I sliced my finger as well as the orange. And for three days, it burned and stung whenever it came

into contact with an abrasive substance, usually salt or something acidic like the orange. And again, the only way to avoid the pain, was to cover it up, prevent contact with offenders. And I find I do a lot of that. Avoid those things which abrade. And that cuts both ways, right? Something hurts, gets under our skin, maybe even tears us apart, and we need to act, to do something to set it right. Maybe we march or run for office or intervene in an abusive situation. We are salt when we are moved to act.

Friday night was cold and dark. Puppies need to be walked frequently, cold and dark, or not. So, on one of our trips outside, I was shivering and hoping Maeve would make it snappy. I wanted to go back inside. The back porch light was on, but it doesn't provide quite enough light. I've been stumbling around for a month now whenever I walk the dog. She apparently can see just fine.

But, instead of dragging me around, Maeve suddenly plopped herself down on the cold, hard ground and started barking. She was looking up toward the mall, which means, she was looking to the north west and barking her head off at a single star overhead. It wasn't a threatening "This is my yard. Go away" kind of bark. It was a "Wanna play?" kind of bark. Pretty fascinating to see her discover something about the universe in which she lives and moves and has her being.

I turned her around so that she would see a whole constellation behind her and the moon waxing full. She ignored my efforts and went back to her conversation with the single star, the solitary light that stood out in the inky sky.

I was a yogi for years. One of my favorite moments in a yoga session was at the end of the hour when we would clasp our hands in front of our hearts, lean slightly forward and say, "Namaste," which I have understood to be, "The divine light in me salutes the divine light in you."

Namaste, friends. May you be salt. May you be light. May you live in God's divine light. Today and always.

*Hymn 314 Christ, Be Our Light verses 1, 2, and 3

*Affirmation of Faith Apostles' Creed p.35

*Hymn 581 Gloria Patri

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

Holy and gracious God,

we give thanks for all the blessings of this life: for comfortable homes, nourishing food, medical care when we are sick; for work to do and strength and ability to do it; for the gift of good neighbors and the love of our families.

Loving God, fill those who suffer, struggle, or live in fear, with peace and reassurance.
Comfort those who weep, heal the broken and shattered, and welcome the lost.
Renew in us the joy of your salvation and restore in us a willing spirit.
We pray as Jesus taught us, saying, Our Father...Amen.

Presenting Our Tithes and Offerings

Offertory

*Hymn 607 Doxology

*Prayer of Dedication

Blessed are you, O God.

**Through your goodness, we have been blessed with the gifts of time, talent, and treasure.
Use us, and what we have gathered, to strengthen your kingdom on earth and benefit those
who have need in body, mind, or circumstance.**

We offer our gifts through Jesus Christ, who died that we might live. Amen.

*Hymn 314 Christ, Be Our Light Verses 4 and 5

*Blessing

Go now, and follow Christ wherever he leads you.

By the grace of God, be all you have been called to be,
and cast wide the net of God's love.

Remind one another of the good news, and hold fast to your saving faith.

In peace, go out to love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*Postlude

Announcements

Session meets next Sunday following worship.

A Service for Ash Wednesday will be held February 22 at 6:30PM in the chapel.