

Salt Heals, Light Reveals

Is 58: 1-12, Mt 5: 13-20

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Isaiah 58: 1-12

Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God. “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose 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?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. 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.

Mt 5: 13-20

“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 underfoot. “You 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 lampstand, 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.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Recognizing God's presence, influence, and love in my life, and wanting to share in this community of faith, I promise with His help, to:

Attend worship services regularly,
Continue to search for spiritual and personal growth,
Share God's bounty with my neighbor through my gifts and offerings,
Use my God-given talents to strengthen this and the universal church,
Show my faith through my words and actions.

So just what are we saying when we recite the Covenant of Membership of Smith Memorial Congregational Church, affirm our baptism and profess our faith beliefs? What are we promising as we cross the threshold from 'friend of Smith Church' to 'member of Smith Church'? And for those of us who once said those words as we joined the church, or who are friends of Smith Church, how do we hear those words anew for ourselves?

We are proclaiming, "Here I am, Lord. I will hold your people in my heart." We are affirming that we have heard the prophetic cry to loosen the bonds of injustice, to share our bread with the hungry at the food pantry, shelter the homeless through Family Promise, provide warm clothing and school supplies for those who are in need, and that we do not to hide ourselves from one another but gather often for worship, prayer and service. We are claiming Jesus' words for ourselves that we are indeed 'the salt of earth, the light of the world' as Jesus calls us to season and enlighten the world. We are saying all of that, and so much more.

"You are the salt of the earth. "You are the light of the world." The rich, profound significance of these two lesson quotes from Jesus have become such commonplace, cultural, clichés that, while complimentary, have had their meaning to us dimmed. When Jesus spoke these words in an ancient world where salt was essential to life yet often scarce, and light was a matter of seasonal nature and lamp oil, he was offering a radical call and bold challenge to his disciples, to his followers.

In our modern world we have the privilege of taking salt for granted. Salt is common and cheap, it is on every restaurant table, it is the familiar blue Morton canister in our pantries, it is a basic ingredient that adds flavor to most of our foods. Yet for thousands of years the value of salt cannot be under estimated. Roman soldiers received their wages in salt. The Greeks considered salt to be divine. Mosaic Law required that all offerings presented by the Israelites contain salt. Salt influenced trade routes, preserved foods to be stored and it was used to help heal wounds.

Jesus' earliest disciples and followers would have been intimately familiar with the value of salt. Without salt, the fish that they caught would quickly spoil and rot. Without salt, human wounds could become infected. Without salt, their gifts to God were not pure and worthy. Without *spiritual* salt, the ability to season the world with a zest for living that was faithful, giving, welcoming, compassionate, loving and justice seeking; the world would know much more moral decay and apathy, much more despair of the human spirit, much more emptiness and loneliness. The salt of the world helps to heal the wounds of indifference and injustice, it helps to preserve the integrity of humanity and creation.

In our modern world we also have the privilege of taking light for granted. Flip a switch, pull back the curtains, or install track lighting. We do not have the restrictions and limits that our not-so-even long-ago faith ancestors did, yet we can easily grasp our call to be light to the world, to reveal and illumine the ways in which God desires for humanity to live and to be. Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, says that we "shine like stars in the world." We reflect the reality of Christ in our lives as a beacon that dispels the darkness. When we worship God with pure hearts,

when we love others as ourselves, when we love ourselves as we love others, and when we do good without growing weary, we are lights shining, lights reflecting Jesus Christ, lights reflecting hope, justice and love.

The words of our Covenant of Membership are words of salt, light, and action: attend, search, grow, share, use and show. Church membership is our entry point *to* the world, not a retreat or respite from the world. We hear Isaiah's prophetic lament that sacrifices and songs, ritual and readings, are only the beginning. Ethical, prayerful, just and genuine actions of faith are the fast the Lord chooses, the Sabbath that God chooses, the vision that God has. Without salt and light, hunger and homelessness drown out our songs and sermons. Without salt and light, ignorance and apathy drown out our prayers and our presence.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel often spoke of the relationship between God, the world, and the worshipping community. God is either hindered or encouraged by our ethical lives. God's own ability to shape the world is influenced by our political and ethical priorities. God is truly involved in the world and has a loving bias toward justice and cares especially for those who suffer oppression, poverty, and injustice. God places justice and relatedness at the forefront, inviting us to live with and for one another *

Jesus said that we *are* "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world." Being salt and light is *not* optional. Jesus did not say you *can* be...or you have the *potential* to be. He said *you are*. When we covenant with a local church, and the Christian church universal, we covenant to be salt, to preserve what is good in the world, and to radiate our light everywhere we go. As followers of Jesus we are called to be flavorful: to season the world; to add zest to life; to bring out the holy flavor of every situation, we are called to be light which illumines even the darkest corners and inspires us to bring forth the light and life in others.

Our worship has nearly ended. Let our service continue. Amen.

*Bruce Epperly