

SERMON FOR EPIPHANY 5A

PREACHED FEBRUARY 5, 2017 AT ZION LUTHERAN, ENOLA PA

Texts: Matthew 5.13-20, Isaiah 58:1-9a, Psalm 112, 1 Corinthians 2.12-16

It's a **promise**, not a **command**. This is, I think, the absolutely **crucial element**, the **crux** of today's gospel lesson. Jesus isn't saying, "You *should* be the salt of the earth and light of the world." Or, "You *have* to be" let alone "You *better* be." Rather, he is saying, **you are** - as in you *already are* the salt of the earth and light of the world. Even if you don't **know** it. Even if you **once** knew it and **forgot**. Even if you have a hard time **believing** it. **You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.**

In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is making a **promise** to his disciples about their very **being**. He is not **commanding**, let alone **threatening**, them about what they should be doing. And that's worth pondering over for a bit, so let's take a few minutes to do that.

So many of us experience God as a **divine law-maker** and **rule-enforcer** rather than a generous and loving **gift-giver**. And because we experience God that way – always setting **expectations** that we can rarely live up to - this lesson of Jesus' doesn't quite **sit right** with us.

But in this passage, **Jesus is making promises and giving out gifts. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.** This is, like last week's gospel story, **sheer blessing**. And, like the week **before**, it is about **identity**, about our very **being**, which in turn leads to **doing**. But before getting there, let's linger on that promise.

Look deeply into your lives over the last couple of weeks, and think of the variety of ways God has used you to be salt and light. Maybe it was

- your words of encouragement to others
- your faithful work at your place of employment
- the volunteering you've done
- the prayers you've offered or protests you've been a part of
- or promises you've made and kept.

Any of these things may seem, in and of themselves, **small**. But please don't forget: **small is what God most often uses to change the world.**

Once you begin to truly believe and embrace Christ's promise that you **are** salt and light – not simply **becoming** or **hoping** to be but actually **are** – then you will begin to **let your light shine** so that people will see your good works and give thanksgiving and glory to God.

And that **matters**, because if **ever there was a time when we needed to be blessed with the gifts of salt and light, it's right now**. Check the headlines; listen to the news; glance over the social media pages – **there is an**

unusually pervasive sense of dis-ease and discord in our world. And the divisions evident in our **country** don't skip all that many of our **congregations**. That dis-ease is just as pervasive among the members of Zion. That is why **we all need to be reminded that we are salt and light, and to feel empowered to let that light shine all the brighter.**

But here's the difficult part: **we don't all agree on what exactly being salt and light looks like.** I have pretty strong opinions about that, and perhaps you do too. But my difficulty is that some of the people who feel very differently than **I** do are people I know well and love - family members, wonderful colleagues, dedicated parishioners - and I find it hard to discard their **opinions** without discarding **them** as people.

So how do I/we **deal** with our divisions and disagreements while continuing to be salt and light? First, let us not underestimate the importance of church being a place where folks of all **different viewpoints** come together. While our congregation's membership and that of many other churches is fairly **homogeneous** in terms of cultural, ethnic, and economic diversity, they are more diverse in terms of **political views** and **generationally** (by age) than most groups in the country. This is something to **celebrate** and **embrace** rather than **shy away from**.

So perhaps part of our congregational calling is to **be** a place that gathers people who may **differ** on how to be salt and light but who commit to **living into** our differences. This may include:

- recognizing the need to be not only **tolerant** but **respectful** of others' views, maybe even trying to better understand that other person's views and how they arrived at them
- **praying for ourselves**, for deeper understanding, for wisdom, and for courage to speak and act in line with our faith. This may include being the salt that just might **sting** and the light that just might **expose** what we do not want to see. But we do so always with respect for one another's opinions and beliefs.
- **praying for each other**, especially those with whom we most differ.

This is a difficult time for many people and for many reasons. **We need salt and light in this world.** And the crazy thing is that **God has already provided it** - right in and through the persons who are seated in front of me right now. **You**, my friends, are salt and light – already!

Now, let's acknowledge that we need to **grow into** our saltiness. God is not **done** with you/us yet! God will **continue** to bless the world through **our prayers, our words, our deeds** as Jesus' faithful disciples. You are salt and light. Jesus **makes that promise** today, and we can either **believe** it and be **changed** by it or continue to **deny** God our full selves.

Unfortunately, for too long, especially in the church, many of us have allowed our light to be **hidden**, even **extinguished**. We have allowed **others** to speak **for us** or **over top** of us. We have relegated ourselves to the **background** as only a reflection of **someone else's** light. As a result, we have watched our communities, our nation, our world, go on as if God does not exist, as if God does not make a **difference** in our lives or theirs. **We have failed to share the Gospel**, the Good News, of Jesus Christ and his salvation.

If you have **lost** your taste, if your **light** is barely visible, then you need to ask yourself why. **What, or whom, do you fear?** What or who has **silenced** you? When and where have you **shied away** from speaking or acting out of concern that you would be met with **resistance**, even **rejection**?

Hear, again, Jesus' promise: You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. If you need to put it on a **post-it note** on your computer screen or your mirror, wear it as a **bracelet** on your wrist, or get out your **baptismal candle** and light it every day in order to **convince** yourself, then **do it**. It's that important!

You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world! And you, and me, are called to **help others believe the same**. AMEN