

Message for February 5, 2023 Tippecanoe Presbyterian Church
“Shining Your Light” Rev. Trish Eckert

- Matthew 5: 13-16 and Isaiah 58: 8-11

Today’s gospel text calls us to discern what God has created us to offer in this world, and to give that; to be salt that will provide savor, to be light through which the presence of God is known.

As we gathered this morning, I noted that much within and around us works against savoring and shining. It is a risk to shine our light and to acknowledge our saltiness and share that with the world.

Jesus’ words this week are meant to wake us, to remind us of what we carry in our bones: the living presence of the God who bids us be salt in this world in all our savory particularity; to be light in the way that only we can blaze.

I am asking myself and asking each of you: how savory are you these days? How is light finding its way into you and through you? Is there anything—or anyone—that is working against this, that is tipping a bushel over your shining? Might there be some part of you that needs revealing, needs to unhide itself in this Epiphany season?

Another voice that is highlighted in the lectionary this week comes from the Prophet, Isaiah, which beautifully informs the Gospel reading. From Isaiah 58: 8-11 we hear:

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 Yahweh shall be your rear guard.

Then you shall call, and Yahweh will answer; you shall cry for help, and God 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. Yahweh 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. (Isaiah 58: 8-11)

Isaiah describes an existence that is rich in the building blocks of life: light and water – which is revealed in the verdant garden of our hearts and the living spring of running water that is available to each and every one of us when we root ourselves in relationship with the divine. This love, then feeds our relationship with ourselves and with one another.

In this chapter, Yahweh calls the prophet to address the problem of people who observe spiritual disciplines for selfish reasons (to gain God’s blessings) while ignoring the hunger, poverty, homelessness, and nakedness of those in need.

The root solution is true devotion to God, which grows naturally out of love for God. People who love God will worship God for the sake of honoring rather than performing. And if we love God, we will also love those whom God loves—our neighbors. That love for God and neighbor will be manifested by taking concrete steps to care for those in need. When we do this, our light is made manifest.

I had an interesting conversation with another pastor, recently – someone whose theology is quite different from mine – someone who used a lot of language about being saved. It got me thinking about a conversation a long time ago with peers of mine when we were in seminary together – one of those late-night, hours-long, far-ranging conversations when everyone is striving to tap into what it means to be human and how we each are seeking meaning as we grapple with mystery.

And it came down to this: when we get to heaven we won’t be asked if we believed the right things or said all the right prayers. We’ll be asked what we did for people around us in need. That points a little further into Matthew’s Gospel – Matthew 25, which in fact is how Tippe identifies itself: as “a Matthew 25 church.” The PCUSA explains that the Matthew 25 invitation focuses on the parable of the sheep and goats in which Jesus makes clear, that what we do matters to God and how we treat others is important to God.

Jesus’ parable in Matthew may have its roots in the first verses of chapter 58 in Isaiah. The people of Israel aren’t experiencing Judgement Day, but in some ways what they’re going through is worse. It’s not known exactly when this message is given, during the exile or after it, but it follows a trauma that has nearly destroyed their society. When Babylon invaded, Israel suffered the destruction of their capital, Jerusalem; the destruction of

the temple, the center of their religious life; and the forced removal of the leadership in their society. It was devastating. And it left them wondering if their God was also broken.

They were angry and hurt and feeling abandoned. That's not some imagined day of judgement. They were left with nothing, and they were desperate to understand why: "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" They're beginning to wonder if it's worth it for them to bother with a God who doesn't seem interested in protecting them. Their argument is: they went through all the motions, they said all the right things, followed all the right rituals but they're still left with nothing.

And the answer they receive is sort of shocking. Turns out it's not enough, or better, it's misguided, to rely on beliefs and piety to improve society or impress God. They want their institutions back. They want everything to return to the way it was. One big difference between what Isaiah is saying and what we often hear in the gospels is Isaiah is focused on the whole society and not the individual. Jesus' life tends to be about his one-on-one interactions. Individuals are brought to belief by their personal encounters with Jesus. For Isaiah the whole society is involved in redemption. They have to shift their whole worldview, their ethos, if they want to experience shalom.

As Franciscan priest Richard Rohr might say, they have to move from *orthodoxy* to *orthopraxy*, from right *belief* to right *practice*. That means re-directing their efforts from preserving their institutions to preserving the well-being of their most vulnerable, to loosing the bonds of injustice, undoing the thongs of the yoke, letting the oppressed go free.

Jesus tells his disciples they are salt and light for the world. Those metaphors can open our imaginations to all sorts of possibilities. Salt is more than seasoning, it's not just an extra added to our food to make it more interesting. Salt is a necessity. Without salt in the right proportion in our bodies none of us could live. In the ancient world without salt to preserve meat and fish, people would starve. Being salt is a way of bringing something essential to make living, life that's whole and lasting, possible. When we stand with the vulnerable, when we insist on policies that can close the wealth gap, that can expand access to healthcare, that can put food on tables and make people's lives more secure, we are being salt for the world; we're helping to preserve life and add flavor to living.

Light in the ancient world, like now, was necessary for safety. When Jesus says, “You are the light of the world,” he’s putting into our hands the responsibility to show the way out of darkness through our commitment to the least, the lost and the lonely. We do that through the ways we behave that offer dignity and hope to people in need. We do that through our warming room - Divine Intervention, and feeding families outside Hephatha Lutheran Church on Saturday mornings through Hungry Hearts, and making meals for our DI guests, and taking turns staying awake so that a room full of vulnerable people can come in out of the cold and sleep safely.

Jesus offers his disciples a path to fulfill Isaiah’s call. The way of salt and light isn’t about individual improvement or cosmetic changes in society. It’s about complete transformation that overcomes injustice and breaks the yoke of oppression. There are no half measures with God. God isn’t offering Israel a future that’s just a repeat of their past. God is offering them a new world. And we should settle for nothing less. By becoming salt and light in the world, by giving of ourselves and putting ourselves on the line, risking our own comfort and security, God can work through us to bring dignity and hope. Amen

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What causes me to hide my light? – *How do we get in our own way? What are we afraid of/what makes us uncomfortable?*
- When do I feel empowered to shine my light? – *What bolsters you and prepares you to take the risk to be your authentic self?*
- How might I shine my light more brightly?
- In what ways can I support others in shining their light?