

“Light of the World”
Matthew 5:13-20; Isaiah 58:1-12

Isaiah 58:1-9

¹Shout 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.

²Yet 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.

³“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.

⁴Look, 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.

⁵Is 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?

⁶Is 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?

⁷Is 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?

⁸Then 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.

⁹Then 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,
¹⁰if 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.

¹¹The 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.

¹²Your 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.

Matthew 5:13-20

[Jesus said to his followers,] ¹³“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 under foot.

¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.

¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In 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.

¹⁷“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸For 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. ¹⁹Therefore, 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.

²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

The Sermon

One of the world’s great minds recently said: “If the world has not approached its end, it *has* reached a major watershed in history, equal in importance to the turn from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. It will demand from us a spiritual blaze; we shall have to rise to a new height of vision, to a new level of life where our physical nature will not be cursed as in the Middle Ages; but even more importantly, our spiritual being will not be trampled upon as in the Modern Era.”

Those words were spoken the graduating class at Harvard by Alexander Solzhenitsyn in 1978.

Then, as now, it felt like the world was becoming something it hadn't been before, like somehow we had passed a point where the things we always thought we could rely on were no longer secure.

One example of a time when that seemed to become devastatingly clearer was a few years ago when Nazis and other white supremacists held a large rally in Charlottesville.

Within the panoply of tragedies and appalling displays that took place at that time, there was a small occurrence that in retrospect seems like it might have been kind of a John 1:5 moment (“A light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it”).

Members of a white nationalist group had assembled behind a fence, with shields and placards and a flag of their organization, and they were shouting a threatening message at an assemblage of people on the street, an interracial gathering that included clergy in their robes and stoles and clergy collars.

A chant had reemerged at that event that anyone who remembers the history of Nazi Germany heard with a shudder: “Jews / will not / replace us.” Here at this spot, the white nationalists were chanting at the interracial, interfaith crowd, “You / will not / replace us.”ⁱ

One of the clergy organizers later said, “[Originally] we were going to stand silently. But the Nazis were marching past us in these various battalions, cursing and [yelling slurs] at us.”

And, he said, he could “feel the energy” within his own group coming from people who hadn't been trained in being peaceful; he said he could feel them starting to get “amped up.”ⁱⁱ

He felt like he had to come up with something to change the atmosphere. “So,” he said, “I just broke into ‘This Little Light of Mine.’”

In footage from that event, you can hear the Nazis, after the singing starts up, try to start up another round of “You / will not / replace us.”

But they stop when it kind of seems like even they could sense how dumb that fearful vitriol sounded in the face of a song of joy and positivity and benevolence being sung with increasing enthusiasm by the crowd they were trying to intimidate.

As that pastor later said, “The tensions went down...and it [seemed like it kind of] shook the Nazis... They didn’t know what to do with all that joy.” The bottom line, he said, was: “We weren’t going to let the darkness have the last word.”

Jesus had begun to attract enormous crowds, and he went up a mountain, and in the midst of the crowd he gathered his disciples around him.

And he said in the hearing of all those who were following him:

“You are the light of the world. Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

Interesting that he would tell them all, here in these early days of his ministry, that they are the light of the world.

These are the same brilliantly intuitive crowds that, according to John’s gospel, were miraculously fed—5,000 families, filled from five loaves and two fish—and then when Jesus told them all they had to do was believe in him, they said: “Well...could you give us a sign?” (John 6:30)

They are the same disciples and same crowds that in Luke are given the parable of the sower of seeds, and having told it to them in all its

majestic and masterfully crafted nuance, Jesus cries out, “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!” And the immediate response from the disciples is: “Could you tell us what that means?” (Luke 8:4-9)

It’s the same population from whom, according to Mark, Jesus would heal people, time after time, and every time, he would conclude by saying, “Go and tell no one.” And of course the first thing they do, every single time, is go tell everybody in the countryside, town, or village. The more he ordered them not to tell anyone, “the more zealously they proclaimed it” (Mark 7:36). At one point he restored the vision of a blind person in Bethsaida, and as he sent him on his way, Jesus said, “Don’t even go *into* the village” (Mark 8:26).

These are the people of insight, intelligence, and obedience about whom Jesus said: “You are the light of the world.”

I remember, as an associate pastor, standing before a solemn congregation on Good Friday, the most somber day of the Christian year. We had a 7:00 A.M. service and a 5:00 P.M. service, and I had a meticulously organized notebook in front of me, so that I could lead all of the Holy Week services, in order, with nothing left to chance.

As the afternoon service began, after some emotionally charged silence, I rose from my chair and with tremendous gravity went to the pulpit and said the first line of the responsive Call to Worship:

“O Lord, open my lips...”

To a sea of blank and unresponsive faces.

I thought, “What’s the matter with you people? Say the response!” And from behind me the pastor, Steve Mowery, said, “This is the 5:00 Good Friday service.” With all the dignity I could muster, I turned the page to the correct service and said, “I mean, ‘The Lord be with you...’”

Light of the world.

Thank God it's not about how much insight or intelligence you possess or how flawlessly you can contain your joy or how impressively you participate in the worship liturgy.

What is the mission? What do we have to do to do the work of God?
How do we shine the light?

*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.

It should probably be said that practically every pastor I know, including myself, has at least one story, usually from early in our ministry when we're still trying to find our way, about having encountered a needy person, and having so embraced the opportunity to help somebody that we have let our boundaries collapse,

and have been severely burned by the experience, taken advantage of or manipulated, sometimes leading to moments, days, weeks or months of headaches or irritation or—and I am not exaggerating this—literally mortal dread for the safety of our families or our congregations.

We still have to be shrewd managers, as Jesus says in other parables; we have to invest our talents wisely, we have to be watchful servants.

Sometimes it takes some learning and some refinement, and sometimes it takes a hard fall or two to learn how to do what God has put us here to do:

to be the light of the world in a world that needs all the light it can get.

Recently a retired political operative—and continuing Christian—gave an interview in which he spent many minutes excoriating both of our major political parties for all the well documented reasons. It was a litany of rotten behavior from all sides in the current political climate, and it painted a pretty grim picture.

But as he closed his remarks—and I'm editing out one extremely unBiblical word—he said, “Falling into despair won't help anyone, though.”

He said, “I mean, you can curse the darkness.

Or you can light a candle.

[And I'm going to get a blankety-blank] welding torch.”ⁱⁱⁱ

There's a novella by Gabriel García Márquez called “No One Writes to the Colonel” where a woman says to the colonel, “You can't eat hope.”

And the colonel says, “You can't eat it, but it sustains you.”

When Jesus told the people following him that they are the light of the world, he had not yet been crucified, had not yet been raised from death and left behind an empty tomb and appeared to the disciples.

The Spirit had not yet descended on the house full of bereaved and frightened disciples “with tongues, as of flame” and inspired and equipped them to prophesy without limits and become the Church.

This was way before any of that, chronologically.

At this point in Matthew’s narrative, they are just a rag tag bunch of mystified followers who don’t even have an explanation for why they are where they are.

To that baffled assemblage of local working class laborers, he said, unequivocally and without exceptions: YOU are the light of the world.

Present tense. Right now. Whether or not you aspired to it or asked to be or, God knows, whether or not you were born with power or money or good genes or rare intelligence or a winsome personality or a dynamite smile.

You. Are. The light. Of the world. Right now.

In the center of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, underneath its gigantic dome, there is a memorial to the architect who designed it, Christopher Wren. It reads simply, in Latin: “Lector, si Monumentum requires, Circumspice.”

“Reader, if you require a monument, look around you.”

When people see how you have shone your light around you, what do you most hope they will see?

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ⁱ Eric Deggans, ‘This Little Light Of Mine’ Shines On, A Timeless Tool Of Resistance’ Heard on All Things Considered, August 6, 2018 8:02 AM ET (<https://www.npr.org/2018/08/06/630051651/american-anthem-this-little-light-of-mine-resistance>)

ⁱⁱ Deggans, “This Little Light,” 2018

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/2/7/21123518/trump-2020-election-democratic-party-james-carville?fbclid=IwAR35b6p_Jkogy9JGEwXh0eX320pbuKHMji4BvYjydOs0KKHyAkqyThla9ME