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Matthew 5:13-20

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.

Isaiah 58

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. 2 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. 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. 4 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. 5 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? 6 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? 7 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? 8 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. 9 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, 10 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. 11 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. 12 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.

If I surveyed what in these readings people like best, it would be a landslide for “salt of the earth...light of the world”. We all sang “Little Light of Mine” in childhood. Isaiah 58’s not so popular. It’s unsettling. So we’d be forgiven if we just skipped it and talked about Jesus’ words, and sang “This Little Light of mine,” over and over.

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I did not preach Isaiah 58 early in my career. It just seemed too harsh. But it's also necessary, and before looking at Jesus' words, Isaiah deserves a closer look. He portrays God speaking to people who invested time and effort in worship: "God, don't we have nice words, impressive architecture, lovely rituals? We even give you one whole hour a week, just for you. Aren't you delighted?" And to paraphrase God's response in Isaiah: "You call *that* worship? Did you ever ask me what I'm actually looking for?"

Even the most committed of us need to hear that question. Like ancient Israel, religion has fallen on hard times. We aren't as big, or as influential, as we were a generation ago, and some of us wonder what went wrong, who's to blame (after all, we're so sincere it couldn't be us...could it?), and why our well-honed religious practices just don't have the *zing* they used to have. Through Isaiah, God says: here's what needs to be corrected. And the heart of *real* worship isn't always "religious". It is love, in hands that get dirty, and feet that go into battle against hunger, which as today's bulletin cover says, restore the beauty around us that's been trampled underfoot by our self-importance, greed, and indifference.

This is God's way in the world. It's as if God says: "Don't worry about me. It's my beloved children that need your attention more than I do. It's OK if you tend to their needs, and call *that* worship, because it really is."

What's nice about Isaiah 58 is that we have this great To-Do list. But in the Gospel, Jesus isn't so helpful. He's clear that He's in no way abolishing what Isaiah said. But instead of a list, He says "*You are the salt of the earth...light of the world*". Nice—but no list. We have to sort this out ourselves.

Among the Biblical phrases in our vocabulary are "going the second mile" and "turn the other cheek" And this one: "the salt of the earth." We use it as a compliment: you're a solid, good person. Or we think of salt as a flavoring, on popcorn, perhaps. But where did "salt of the earth" come from? Yesterday, those of us who visited Milwaukee's *Growing Power* greenhouses saw how food can be a partnership with nature; there are all around us compounds, elements, and natural processes that can nurture our health and our community. Jesus' listeners knew about growing too; to them, salt was key to survival. Meat and fish had to be preserved; salt made that possible. In their world, salt had an impact on all of life, not just preserving food. It melted into whatever it touched, and changed it. Even if you could not see the salt, it was making a difference.

That, Jesus says, is a metaphor for *you*. Your presence flavors our world; your actions can change what's around you, often without being noticed.

I think we get that. In fact, I think we like being "salt". We like just blending in and somehow making a difference—and protecting our anonymity at the same time. If salt is all we have to be, then we can be "stealth Christians", and no one will bother us—like being a tourist in London: we look enough like the locals, so nobody bothers us.

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That's not so easy in Bangkok. And like tourists in Thailand, Jesus won't let us hide either. "*You are the light of the world.*"

Living in a city, we have almost no idea what Jesus describes. But travel to the north country, up past, say, Eagle River, walk into the woods, wait until it's really dark—and give one of us a flashlight. How noticeable is the one with the flashlight? Everyone wants to be their best friend! 2,000 years ago, light was hard to come by; when it got dark, it got frighteningly dark—and if you had even a candle, people would come to you.

For the disciples, it was dangerous to be seen with Jesus—but we too, will be seen; ours is an inescapably visible faith. There's nothing stealthy about light; it doesn't try to be seen; but when it's dark, it's hard to hide. Same for us, fellow disciples: try to hide, and God may "out" you! We may be the light some need when their own light, their own hope, goes out.

And notice: Jesus did not say: "Would you like to be salt and light?" We already are. We, brothers and sisters, are the light "of the world". None of the disciples became celebrities, but to Jesus, these ordinary, hard-working, politically powerless people were the stuff that Heaven's made of, chosen by God to flavor and brighten the world. Today, we shine, not only in this room, but in our offices, classrooms, neighborhoods, homes; even in cyberspace. People: you, and I, we together, can flavor the world with grace, love, peace, generosity, and brighten the world with hope in life's darkest hours. What an amazing gift!

God is empowering a new generation of Christ-followers to be "salt" and "light" like never before. This is no time to be timid. The light of Christ—a light of peace, reconciliation, compassion, hope—has never been more important. "Let your light shine." May we find new ways to be flashlights in the forest.

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