

Yr. A, Epiphany 5
February 9, 2020
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1572 Words

Lessons: Isaiah 58:1-12
Psalm 112:1-10
1 Corinthians 2:1-12
Matthew 5:13-20

This morning, we heard how the prophet, Isaiah, was called, not to *speak* to the religious people of his nation, but rather to *shout out*...to wake them up!

We should listen very carefully to what God says through the prophet, Isaiah, because it is the foundation of what God said *and did* through Jesus Christ.

Now, since we don't think of fasting as an act of worship, I'm going to paraphrase this prophesy so we can hear it clearly in our context, whether that be the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington D.C. or a worship service at an Episcopal parish in Greenville, S.C.

This is what God said: “(You) act as if (you) were a nation that practiced righteousness...(You) ask of *me* righteous judgments. (You) delight to draw near to God (*for yourself*).”

(And you *wonder*), “Why do we (worship), but you do not see, (O Lord)? *Why (should we)* humble ourselves, if you don't notice.”

God replies, “Look, you serve your *own interest* when you (gather to pray) *and* you oppress all your workers. Look, you (gather for prayer) *only* to quarrel...(Making an ‘appearance’ at prayer)...will not make your voice heard on high. You call *this* a day acceptable to the Lord?”

God is on a roll. God does not wait for our answer. God gives his *own answer*:

“Is not *this* the (kind of prayer and devotion that) I choose: (for *you*) to stop the injustice, (for *you*) to relieve the heavy burdens on other people, (for *you*) to let the oppressed experience some freedom...

Is it not (for you) to share *your food* with the hungry, and (to make sure the homeless and poor have safe shelter). When you see the (cold and vulnerable to share *your clothes* with them), and not to hide your face (from those who are in need).”

“(When you do this...) *then* your light shall break forth like the dawn (of a new day), and your healing shall spring up quickly; *then* I will go before you, and *I will also have your back*. *Then*, you shall call me, and *I will answer*; and when *you cry* for help, I will say, Here I am.”

On the west bank of the Sea of Galilee you will find lush, green gardens at the Monastery of the Beatitudes. A beautiful chapel stands on the slope, like a light on a hill that cannot be hid. Walking along the exterior portico you can look through the palm trees and out over the water.

Entering the chapel, a central dome rises up over the circular worship space. The architecture draws you toward our center—Jesus Christ—as you look and listen to the Isaiah-inspired vision which Jesus preached during the Sermon on the Mount, nearby.

The scene is bucolic, pastoral. This is the kind of place we can feel close to God. It's a place where we might gather for prayer...a place where we might call and expect God to answer...a place where we might cry for help, and expect God to say, “Here I am.”

It can be so tempting to settle in and savor the comfortable words of Jesus—blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, the righteous, the merciful, and the pure in heart. It is so easy to savor these sweet blessings as we think only of ourselves, and all the hard knocks we have felt.

God knows we intend to be righteous and pure in heart *as much as we can*. We are drawn to the light of Christ—the light of a divine promise of salvation. It is like the light of a cozy chapel—a light on a hillside that cannot be hid. But it is not a light for us, alone.

If you walk out the doors of that chapel, descend the grassy hillside and take a boat across the Galilean Lake to the eastern shore, you'll find yourself in the Jordan River Valley—a deep geological crease in the earth, serving as part of an ancient highway from Egypt to Syria.

Walking south along the riverbank, you recall the bewildered children of Israel who crossed through this valley, and who *saw the light* of a Promised Land described by the prophet, Moses. You recall the miraculous cleansing of Naaman, the Syrian army commander, the foreigner who *saw the light* through the Israelite prophet, Elisha. You recall the massive crowds who came out into this wilderness to be baptized, and who *saw the light* through the prophet, John the Baptist.

Descending from the verdant hillside of the Galilean Lake, about 90 miles to the south, you'll finally hit the rock bottom of the earth—the Dead Sea. 1400 feet below sea level in the scorching desert heat, nothing is alive—in the water or around the water. It is a place of intense, environmental stress. The one thing which is plentiful here is salt, yielded in abundance as the saline waters evaporate to reveal crystals all around.

I think this is a parable! It is the stress of our lives...the times *we* feel the heat...that our true grit...our salt emerges. We don't want salt, though. We want the Good Shepherd to make us lie down in those *green* pastures of Galilee, and lead us beside those still and (refreshing) waters, and revive our souls.

We want the comfortable stability which comes from our reasonable expectations being met by *someone else*—whether it is a president or the congress, a governor or the legislature, a bishop or a priest, an employer or a stock broker, a teacher or a coach, a family member, or a friend. We want to sit back and say, “Somebody ought to *do something* about this.”

Well, it is our turn to wake up like the religious people who listened to Isaiah and those first followers of Jesus who listened to his Sermon on the Mount. Jesus never said, “Blessed are those with reasonable expectations for other people.”

Rather, Jesus seems to know that the world out there is both stressful and in need of seasoning, and so he says, “*You* are the salt of the earth.” In other words, “Be good for something.” Jesus knows that the world out there is enveloped in darkness, and so he says, “*You* are the light of the world. In other words, “Let *your light* shine!”

Last week the Rev. Alan Bentrup revealed in his sermon just how important it is to show up for worship. In fact, I believe he described the worship life of the aged Simeon and the elderly Anna in the Temple of God as a miracle of perseverance.

He's right! Those who faithfully show up to worship, sing, and pray—week after week and year after year—*you are* miracles of God. I am grateful for you, and—more importantly—I believe God is grateful for you.

When you think about it, we are actually *blessed* to be able to gather for worship. We are blessed to behold the Light of Christ, a light to enlighten the nations. We are blessed to be seasoned with the salt of Jesus' own testing which we remember at this altar every single week.

Well, if Gospel for last Sunday was about the importance of showing up; then the Gospel for this Sunday is about the importance of going out! Let me remind you again.

Jesus said, "YOU are the salt of the earth." If your salt has lost its taste, it is no longer good for anything. Do you hear his challenge? Jesus is saying, "Be useful. Take the salt that has emerged from your own testing, and offer it as a gift to others. Be good for something...or for someone!" My question is this—who is waiting for *your* salt? Who out there is hoping for someone like you to be *good*...and useful?

Jesus also said, "YOU are the light of the world." If your lamp is not on a lampstand, it is not good for anything. Do you hear his challenge? Jesus is saying, "Let *your* light shine for others!" Take the light you have received in worship and prayer, and carry it to somewhere else for someone who is hindered by darkness. My question is this—who is waiting for *your light* to shine? Who out there is praying for someone like you to be good...and useful?

I do believe the Lord is blessed when we show up to worship. And I also believe our Lord Jesus Christ is smart enough to know the difference between religious consumers and vessels of salt and light.

The prophet, Isaiah, work up the religious people so they might see the completely unnatural disconnect between their appearance at prayer and their disappearance when it came to the needs of their neighbors.

Likewise, Jesus wakes us up so we might see that you and I are 'Plan A.' There is no 'Plan B.' Jesus said, "*You* are the salt of the earth," not "*I* am the salt of the earth." Jesus said, "*You* are the light of the world."

So, pray that you will discover who out there is waiting for your salt and who out there is in need of your light. And then, be the lights of the world in this generation, and the chosen vessels of God's grace.¹ Be salt. Be light. Be good and useful for someone.

Amen.

¹ This language "the chosen vessels of God's grace and the lights of the world in their generations" is drawn from the preface used during the Great Thanksgiving at the commemoration of a saint. *The Book of Common Prayer*, p.380.