

I've always been puzzled about the Biblical imagery of salt and saltiness. If Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of salt, and the Salt Sea (also known as the Dead Sea) is a symbol of death, desolation, and despair,<sup>1</sup> how can salt possibly be a good thing? You may remember that in Matthew's Gospel Jesus proclaims that we should be the salt of the earth<sup>2</sup>, and here in Mark's Gospel, he explains that everyone will be salted with fire,<sup>3</sup> as though that's a good thing. What's up with that?

Of course we know salt is a necessary preservative for food, preventing rot and decay. As a result, in the ancient world, salt became a symbol of endurance and worth. Therefore, it was used in worship<sup>4</sup> as a primary ingredient in incense and other offerings that would be presented before the ark of the covenant<sup>5</sup>. It was also used when making a covenant, symbolic of the perpetual intention of keeping one's promises and the indissoluble relationship between God and God's people.<sup>6</sup>

There is a connection between salt and new beginnings. In some areas, newborn were, interestingly enough, rubbed with salt after they were washed and the cord cut, but before they were swaddled.<sup>7</sup> To salting your baby was a ritual that indicated that the child's path was determined, their status in the family and community was established, that they would not grow up and go their own way.

Perhaps not surprisingly, salt was used in ways that both cursed and blessed communities. Cities that were captured were spread with salt ... a curse that prevented new agricultural growth and prosperity, but also symbolized a break from their past alliances and allegiances.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, communities like Jericho were blessed through salt: Elisha treated a bad water supply with salt in order to remove a curse, initiating a new beginning.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Deut 29:23

<sup>2</sup> Matt 5:13

<sup>3</sup> Mk 9:49

<sup>4</sup> Ex 30:35, Lev 2:13, Ezek 43:24

<sup>5</sup> Ezra 6:9

<sup>6</sup> Num 18:19

<sup>7</sup> Ezek 16:4

<sup>8</sup> Judges 9:45

<sup>9</sup> 2 Kings 2:21

As you know, for several hundred years before Christ, salt had been used as an anti-septic, as a laxative, for digestive issues, and respiratory diseases. It was well known to have healing properties when used medicinally, facilitating the cleansing of both the inner and outer physical body.

By Jesus' time, the ritual use of salt in worship dropped away, but it remained a powerful image in the minds and cultural lexicon of 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine.

By that point in time, salt denoted a state of purity, moral worth<sup>10</sup> and Godly interactions with others<sup>11</sup>. There was an almost exclusively positive connotation to its imagery.

As I mentioned, salt maintains the integrity of food and was therefore necessary for life in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, just as it is now. Those whom Jesus referred to as 'the salt of the earth' had chosen the direction of their efforts: their time and talent had been dedicated to ways that would contribute to the preservation of the community and a resistance to corruption until the Lord's return. If the followers of Jesus lost their 'saltiness,' their efforts would not yield the same results and the community could suffer. The salty people of God, therefore, single-mindedly nourish and sustain the communities in which they live, bringing out the best of the people they encounter, encouraging others to flourish in healthy and creative new ways – and ideally, discover their own saltiness.

In our Gospel passage this morning, the image of salt is used to describe how the followers of Jesus must be salted with fire. Like the sacrifices made before the ark of the covenant, the disciples are to strive to be pure, free from rot and decay, and not pose any spiritual threat to the common good.

Jesus explains that those who follow him don't mislead others, or challenge them in ways that either diminish them or are unproductive to their growth. When an individual is new to the community of believers or in any way young in their life of faith, salty Christians help form them into mature disciples, cultivating the best qualities of that individual: drawing out their gifts and talents to the glory of God. In other words, Jesus' salty followers actively avoid causing 'the little ones' to stumble and help them discover who and whose they are.

The salty people of God exert themselves physically and spiritually as they do the work of building up God's kingdom. They are not simply floats on God's holy

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<sup>10</sup> Lk 14:34-35

<sup>11</sup> Col 4:6

fishing line bobbing up and down on the waters of life, but rather life preservers in the body politic that fight against abuse, moral turpitude, and all sorts of misconduct. They care for the vulnerable, tend to the sick, feed the hungry, and work for the good of God's kingdom.

And Jesus says, everyone will be salted with fire. We are seasoned by the circumstances and situations of our lives, both positive and negative. Our experience gained through our life's ups and downs draw out our awareness of the many ways God nourishes us, tends to us, heals us, and brings us into holy community with others. In essence, salt is good because it hones our spiritual palate. Of course, it can sting when our wounds encounter it, but we are ultimately stronger and healthier when those tender places are exposed to the healing agents of God's love and compassion. Being salted with fire means that good things can occur within trying circumstances.

Moses knew this firsthand. He was tired and annoyed and told God, "these aren't my monkeys and this isn't my circus. Why is this my problem?!?" God's response was to support Moses, delegate the responsibilities, remind Moses and the wanderers that they were loved, cared for, continually fed and provided for, and eventually led them into the promised land. Moses was salted by leading the people out from Egypt and through the wilderness. He maintained his saltiness by holding steadfast to his mission, despite his weariness ~ a deep physical and spiritual fatigue ~ and taking the next faithful step in the direction God had pointed him. That salt was good.

James, the writer of our epistle, urges that all who are in need, all who suffer, all who rejoice, turn to the Lord in prayer. His trust of God's provision that resulted from a life steeped in prayer and Godly relationships is indeed salty and good.

Not unlike Moses or James, following in the way of Jesus does not always lead us in expected ways ~ and it can often be uncomfortable or even sting. Sometimes, the salt may seem more like a curse than a seasoning. And there are times that the fire may seem all-consuming rather than refining. But we can trust that God will preserve us.

How are we being salted now? Most of us have stories of roads we've travelled that were unfamiliar and paths that were unwanted. Perhaps some of us are walking that road right now. Maybe we are blind to the activity of God in and through people we know because we deem them unworthy. Perhaps we have encountered numerous stumbling blocks, or even may have erected some

ourselves. And maybe there are aspects of our life that need exorcizing ~ habits we stubbornly hold on to or toxic relationships in which we engage. Maybe we have lost some of our saltiness and we refuse to accept the refining love of God in our lives.

In God's eyes, each one of us is worth our salt. God empowers each one of us to alter the flavor of our environment ~ socially, politically, economically. We are granted the authority to cast out the 'demons' of our culture in Jesus' name. As preservationists of Christ's beloved community, we have the capacity to enhance the gifts that others bring, be carriers of peace in Jesus' name, and be agents of healing in our broken world.