

SERMON

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The Sermon on the Mount continues. We heard the beginning last week, as Jesus declared the blessing of God to those who are poor in spirit, those who are mourning, those who are hungry for righteousness, merciful and peacemaking. God's blessing is a present reality, not some longed for, future hope. It's reality – no strings attached.

He goes on to say what we hear this morning, "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." I'm not going to say anything about being the "salt of the earth." Mostly because no one's really sure what Jesus was trying to say. The chemistry just doesn't make sense – not that there's anything wrong with chemistry analogies here in the land of Dupont.

But I like light – I almost made a career of crafting light in theater. And I want us to imagine what it means to bring light to the world, especially in days that feel so incredibly dark. We hear this analogy of us being the light of the world – again a present reality that Jesus names – and it makes us feel just a little bit warmer on this cold, bitter morning.

It makes us feel like maybe we can bring hope to a world that feels steeped in darkness. It brings us back to the waters of the font where we so boldly and faithfully proclaim that anyone who is newly baptized is already the light of the world and is to "let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

But what do we actually do? What does it mean for us to actually **be** light in the world we have today? What comes next?

In the Gospel of Matthew, what comes next is more of the sermon. Jesus isn't done. He moves on to the next topic, the law, and will keep going all the way to the end of chapter 7. This is chapter 5. That's a lot of sermon. But Jesus does it with purpose and chronological intention. You are blessed, first and foremost. You are claimed and loved by God. That's where the life of discipleship starts.

We only get the introduction of what comes next this morning. We're not going to get the rest of the sermon. Next week is Transfiguration so we jump somewhere else in the story, then we start Lent, so we jump to a different part of Matthew's story. Then we jump into the Gospel of John for some great (and long) stories.

We'll have to settle for the short snippet we get. What we **get** is a bold, blasphemous claim that Jesus makes about fulfilling the law. It's said in different ways depending on which story you hear. In Luke's Gospel it came in the synagogue in Nazareth

and was framed as fulfillment of the prophet Isaiah. When he said it there, he was run out of town.

In Matthew's story, the sermon leads to a swell of followers as Jesus continues the journey toward Jerusalem and the cross. The outrage doesn't come immediately, but it will come. You can't stand on a mountaintop and claim to have completely redefined a foundational covenant without pushback.

But the claim remains, "I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." In one simple sentence, Jesus set the world spinning. The Pharisees, lawyers, and authorities will eventually conspire to execute him for his heretical boldness. Theologians will, for generations, debate and argue about what it means to fulfill the law, a debate that continues to this day, 2000 years later.

Because we have a love-hate relationship with the law. We are really good at taking the light that we are supposed to be and shining it everywhere we want to see...and keeping it out of the places we don't want to see. We're good at taking the spotlight and shining it on something we want to judge. We're good at taking that high-powered flashlight and directing it only where we want it to go. Some of us have mastered this technique. Some of us have turned into an industry. Some of us think we don't do it, but we really do.

Some, maybe a lot, of the theory of theatrical lighting that I was taught a few decades ago has become a bit jumbled around in my head over the years. But I still remember that when you're lighting a scene, there should be motivation for the light you use. If you're in a living room, it might be a table lamp. If you're in a cave in the wilderness, it might be the moonlight coming through the doorway. If you're on a 18th century street in New York at night, it's the streetlamps.

The rest of the light used to illuminate the stage then fills in the picture so that the audience can see. But you don't simply turn on all the floodlights and make the stage as bright as possible. Well, you can, but I, for one, will judge you.

So, if we are the light of the world, if we're going to illuminate God's love for all to see, what are we going to use as the motivating light? So many folks who quote this language would fall back to that accusatory spotlight, telling the world that all **their** sins have to be exposed in the harsh light of an interrogation room so that they can find their way to God's love.

The implication is clear, at least to me, "you aren't lovable until you change your behavior and stop sinning." Which means salvation is entirely dependent. On. you. Being

blessed is entirely dependent. On. you.

But that's **not** what Jesus said. Jesus said, you are blessed. Jesus said you are light. Jesus said the law **is** fulfilled. In him.

What if the light we offer to the world is a candle? Yes, we have candles in worship as a symbol of the presence of God shining in the darkness, but have you ever noticed how much light a candle can actually offer – or how much a **collection** of candles can illuminate.

One of my favorite scenes I ever lit was the end of Romeo and Juliet. It takes place in the tomb where everybody dies, literally. I don't think that requires a spoiler alert. It is 400 years old. It was my favorite because I tried to make the light as dim as possible. I wanted the audience to be drawn into the reality of that place and pay attention to what was happening. I was really proud of how little light I used and how powerful that scene was with very little visibility.

It doesn't take harsh, overwhelming light to overcome the darkness. If you step into the darkness and turn on a 1000-watt spotlight, you're still going to be blind. But if you step into the darkness and light a candle, within moments, you'll see what's happening around you.

Figuratively speaking, when we step into the darkness of the world around us, we can shine a mag-light of accusation and judgment or we can light a candle, then another candle, and another. The light of hope that spreads will still illuminate the darkness. We'll still be able to see what has to be named as evil and wrong. We'll still be able to fix what has to be fixed and call out what has to be called out for the evil that it is.

But maybe if we remember the hope that we bring in candlelight, we won't forget that we are blessed, that we are loved, that we are claimed, and so are the people who are in the darkness with us. Amen.