

February 9, 2020
“Light(s) of the World”
Isaiah 58:1-12 & Matthew 5:13-20
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By the time I graduated from college, with my shiny new dual degree in English and Communication, degrees originally intended to land me a career in journalism, I had no idea what I wanted to do.

During my four years, I got involved with a United Methodist church and campus ministry that helped me begin the critical process of examining and interrogating the Christian faith I'd inherited—one that emphasized personal salvation, personal relationship with God and Jesus, and not much else.

I had some meaningful experiences of faith-based service in college—and I point particularly to a couple of weeklong mission trips to South Florida to help with United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) rebuilding efforts following Hurricane Andrew. Still, almost 30 years ago now, one of only a few Category 5 storms to make landfall in the United States, and still the most destructive hurricane ever to hit Florida.

Some of you know that I was born and raised in a small town in central Ohio—a not atypical, mostly white Midwestern town surrounded by farm country. I didn't have the perspective to realize it at the time, but I led a sheltered life. And I can say now that I also grew into a pretty sheltered faith.

I had never experienced or even witnessed the kind of devastation and poverty and suffering I saw in south Florida. Huge swaths of land cleared of everything but an occasional snapped palm tree. Poor families who didn't have much in the way of material comfort in the first place, who had even less after the hurricane partially or entirely destroyed their modest homes.

I didn't know what I wanted to do, but those experiences of faith-based service informed my decision to apply to the United Methodist Church's US-2 program, a two-year domestic service program run in collaboration with AmeriCorps. I ended up in Baltimore, living in community with other young adults, and assigned in my case to a Reconciling United Methodist congregation on the north side. I had no idea what a Reconciling

Congregation was at that point. I had barely visited a large city, much less lived and worked in one. I spent much of my time helping to run an emergency homeless shelter housed in the church's basement. I became friends with men who were mostly chronically homeless. Mostly addicted to heroin or alcohol. Many diagnosed with HIV or AIDS.

Those two years had a profound impact on my life, and what I intended to do with it. I got pushed spiritually, theologically, politically. I was introduced to the radical Jesus and the social gospel. I came to understand for the first time the difference between “charity”—which is as far as my small-town Christian faith could take me in engagement with the world—and “justice.”

I helped plan and joined street protests on behalf of the homeless poor. I risked arrest sitting in at the Maryland Governor's office, demanding reinstatement of a disability assistance program that had recently been cut. I began, for the first time in my privileged life and with my narrowly defined and expressed Christian faith, to connect my faith with action. To put my faith into action. Beyond myself. And beyond mere service.

“Preach the Gospel at all times . . . if necessary, use words.” Some variation or another of that quote is often attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, though there does not seem to be any clear evidence that he actually said it.

Regardless, he did offer other sentiments in the same vein: “While you are proclaiming peace with your lips, be careful to have it even more fully in your heart.” OR “It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking is our preaching.”

The gist is the same. A gist echoed in the letter of James: “What is it . . . if someone says he has faith but does not have works? . . . If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works,’ Show me your faith apart from works, and I will show you my faith by my works . . .”

Jesus, whose walking and living was indeed his preaching, did also use words to make the same basic point. Picking up where we left off last week with his Sermon on the Mount, he says, “You are salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be

restored? . . . You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and gives light to all in the house . . . “

You are the light of the world. Now remember that Jesus, at least according to John's gospel, claims that he is the Light of the World. And remember that John's gospel—the one so unlike Matthew, Mark and Luke, and even the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas (“which one of these is not like the others”)—begins with a dramatic description of the Word, the Greek *logos*, becoming flesh, placing Jesus with God at creation. “What has come into being in (the Logos) was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

If you read further, between chapters 6 and 15, you get the seven “I Am” statements, including “I am the Light of the World.” Now I need to say here that while these statements are attributed to Jesus, many scholars suggest that they are examples of the author of John's gospel putting words into the historical Jesus' mouth—because Jesus was not otherwise known to make such dramatic statements about himself, or to refer to himself as the Messiah. These were more likely claims that others in the early church made about him.

In any case, for our purposes this morning, it is compelling to note that Jesus, the One who was certainly seen by many as the Light of the World, even if he didn't make that claim himself, turns to his gathered disciples and tells them that *they* are the light of the world. For all the expectation surrounding the coming Messiah, Jesus affirms that they are the ones they've been waiting for. You are salt for the earth. You, you are the light of the world.

There is a story from Judeo-Christian tradition that speaks well to this point:

Once there was a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Some of the younger monks had left in dissatisfaction, and no new men were joining. There were but a handful of monks and their leader, the abbot, remaining. They began fighting among themselves, each blaming the hard times on the faults and failings of the other.

One day a traveling rabbi stopped at the monastery for a night's rest. He ate, and prayed alongside the other monks. The next day, as the rabbi prepared to continue on

his journey, the abbot drew him aside. He told him of the problems of the monastery and asked him for his observations and for some advice to share with the other monks.

Upon hearing the abbot's woes, the rabbi was quiet for some time.

"Cannot you give me some advice to help my monastery to thrive again? the abbot asked.

"Your monks will not listen to my advice," the rabbi replied. "But perhaps they would benefit from an observation. The Messiah dwells among you here at the monastery."

"One of us?" asked the abbot, astonished. "Which one?"

"Oh, that I cannot say," he answered. "Share this with your brothers, and in time it shall be revealed to you."

The abbot thanked him and sent him on his way. He then gathered the monks together, who listened in amazement to the news.

"One of us! But who?" each one asked out loud. Then to themselves they wondered, "It couldn't be Brother Robert—or could it?"

"Surely not Brother Henry, but there are times when . . . "

"Not the youngest, well, maybe . . . "

"The abbot himself?"

"Could it be me?"

Soon things began to change at the monastery as each began to see the Messiah in the other and to hear the Messiah's words in each word spoken.

Soon people began to wander back to the monastery, and in time new men joined and the monastery thrived.

We know from the rest of the Gospel text that Jesus is preaching against the religious establishment of the day—represented by the scribes and Pharisees. You may know that the Pharisees were a sect of Judaism concerned with strict observance of Mosaic law, and here in the context of Roman occupation. Confrontations between them and Jesus appear regularly throughout the gospels.

After declaring, he says, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but fulfill. . . . For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

As Moses introduced the law on Mount Sinai, so Jesus reinforces it here. Not to abolish it, but to fulfill it. To insist that to be salt and light requires observance of the spirit, not just the letter, of the law.

Prime example. Chapter 12, Jesus' healing on the Sabbath. The Pharisees claim it's not lawful to do anything on the Sabbath—the letter of the law meant, of course, to ritualize a day of rest for the people and their land, inspired by the creation narrative. Jesus goes further, healing a man with a withered hand and declaring that it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. If the rules get in the way of the good, what good are they?

William Sloane Coffin writes: "It is bad religion to deify doctrines and creeds. While indispensable to religious life, doctrines and creeds are only so as signposts. Love alone is the hitching post." Love alone is the hitching post, says Jesus.

He declares that "you are salt and light," but then asks, rhetorically, what good are you if you've lost your saltiness or if you hide your light under a bushel? What good is the law when it becomes, what good is your faith if it becomes, what good are you if you become, an obstacle rather than a vehicle to love.

What good is it when the law Trumps (and I use that word intentionally) love. When the salt meant to add flavor and preserve and heal loses its saltiness. When the light meant to expose truth and enable life grows dim, hidden under a bushel.

"In the same way," Jesus goes on, "let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to God in heaven."

And what does it mean to let your light shine before others? This is not unlike the question we explored a couple of weeks ago about what it means to follow Jesus? He continues, as we'll hear in next week's reading, with some additional perspective on this question. But for today, we turn back to the prophet Isaiah—whose prophecy Jesus says he came to fulfill.

And Isaiah, like Micah last week, is clear with his answer to the question. Like Jesus, he challenges the emphasis on orthodoxy—right belief and legalism—over orthopraxis—right practice. He confronts what he sees as "false worship"—religious ritual, in this case fasting,

that has become nothing more than a hollow, superficial gesture. Remember St. Francis' words, "While you are proclaiming peace with your lips, be careful to have it even more fully in your heart." Isaiah adds: and in your practice. In your action.

"Why do you fast, but you do not see? Why humble yourselves, but you do not notice? Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day.

"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?" Do justice, love kindness, Micah says. In other words, your religion, your spirituality, your faith is shallow, narrow, meaningless, self-serving, dead—if it does not also express itself through love in action, participation in the life-giving work of charity and justice.

Action beyond belief. Orthopraxis beyond orthodoxy. Spirit beyond letter.

"Then your light shall break forth like the dawn." And onto verse 10: "If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, 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.

"And you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, who waters never fail. 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."

Streets to live in. Whose streets? Our streets! Whose streets? Our streets! Whose streets? Our streets! Whose streets? Our streets!

No longer streets stained with the blood of bodies destroyed by gun violence. No longer streets home to the homeless and addicted. No longer streets marked by abandoned houses and barred windows, crippled by ghettoized poverty. No longer streets flooded by the torrential rains of global warming. No longer streets and homes and schools and workplaces and churches and neighborhoods and rivers and oceans where political or

religious laws and policies and practices put profits or “purity” before the well-being of all people and the planet.

Our collective light has grown dim, hidden under a bushel, but the darkness will not overcome it. Jesus says, let your light shine, so others may see Love. And Cornel West reminds us “to never forget that justice is what love looks like in public.”

You are the light of the world. We are all lights of the world. May our collective light break forth like the dawn, may our light shine in the midst of darkness and brokenness—and with it the persistent possibility of a world where breaches are repaired. Where creation is restored. Where no one goes hungry. Where no one is homeless. Where our streets are safe to live in. Where everyone has enough. Where justice leads to peace.

Friends, we are the ones we've been waiting for! May we preach the gospel, the good news, accordingly—with our lives and not merely our words. May love be our hitching post, may we be vehicles to love in action. May our walking and our living and our giving and our serving and our voting and our organizing and our protesting . . . be our preaching.

May it be so.