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The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

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Believers are Salt and Light

God creates believers to be salt and light: Salt to preserve the earth and keep it from rotting, light to overcome the darkness and shine for all to see. As Jesus teaches his followers how they are to live, he encourages them to be what they are: *You are salt and light; now be salt and light!* We live as obedient servants of God so that others might see our good works and be drawn to know the truth about God.

Sermon

Matthew 5:13-20

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

It's quite natural for us to think of Jesus as the light of the world. The prophet Isaiah wrote, “on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned” (Isaiah 9:2). We recognize Jesus as that light. The apostle John wrote, “In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness” (John 1:4-5a). We recognize that in this verse John was writing about Jesus. It's natural for us to think of Jesus as the light of the world. In the chapter just before today's gospel lesson, Matthew recorded Jesus doing what we might expect the light of the world to do. He let his light shine. “Jesus went throughout Galilee teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among their people” (Matthew 4:23). And as Jesus let his light shine, people reacted how you might expect them to. “News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all those suffering severe pain, the demon possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him” (Matthew 4:24-25). Last week we heard the beatitudes that Jesus spoke to those crowds who recognized him. This week, we'll hear the next words he said. Jesus, the one we recognize as the light of the world, said to his disciples gathered on that mountainside and still says to his disciples today,

You Are the Light of the World

God has made you the light of the world
so that you may let your light shine in your life.

God Made You a Light

We naturally think of Jesus as the light of the world for good reason. The gospel writers often spoke of Jesus that way. All throughout the Bible we find God communicating the truths of life and death, of sin and grace, using the metaphor of light and darkness.

The darkness of life is something with which all of us are all too familiar. Every day we are reminded of the inescapable truth that things are not as they should be. From life's minor inconveniences to the major concerns, to the life-changing tragedies, we are constantly reminded of the darkness of life. From the minor slip of the tongue to the harbored feelings of hatred, to the downright damaging mistakes, we are constantly reminded of the darkness in *our* lives. It's not God's will that people walk in darkness. It's not God's will that *we* walk in darkness. So, the first step he took to bring us out of darkness was to show us the difference between darkness and light.

Through the law of Moses and the Old Testament prophets, God showed people the difference between walking in light and walking in darkness. God tells us that people who walk in light are perfect. They do not steal. They do not lust. They aren't dishonest. They put others before themselves. They honor their parents and those in authority. They love God above all things. They will joyfully walk in light for all eternity. God in the law tells us that people who walk in light are perfect. What does that lead us to conclude about ourselves? People who walk in light do not steal, even during tax season. People who walk in light do not lust, even for a moment. People who walk in light show due honor to those in authority, even with the things they post and share online. People who walk in light love God above all things, *all* things, *all* the time. When God tells us what it is to walk in the light, all we can conclude about ourselves is that we are lost in darkness, the darkness of sin.

The light of Jesus dispels the darkness of sin. The words he said and the things he did while he was on earth made that perfectly clear. To those suffering from disease, Jesus brought healing. To those mourning loss, Jesus brought comfort. To those full of guilt, Jesus brought peace. To those bound by sin, Jesus brought freedom. To those held captive to death, Jesus brought everlasting life. Jesus is the light whom God promised would free the world from the darkness of sin forever. Christ made up for every mistake we made, blinded by the darkness of sin, through his once for all sacrifice on the cross. For there, Jesus became everyone who walked in the darkness. Though Jesus only ever walked in the light of perfection, God considered him to be everyone who has ever walked in darkness and punished him accordingly. Jesus died the death that we who walk in darkness deserved. His body was enclosed by darkness and sealed in a tomb. But three days later, that darkness was dispelled. As the stone was rolled away, the light of the Easter dawn shone into the tomb to reveal that Jesus was alive again. Jesus' resurrection proves that he truly is the light of the world, the light that no darkness can overcome (John 1:5). He's the light that *no* darkness can overcome. He's the light that *your* darkness can't overcome. Even your darkest sins are dispelled by the light of Jesus. Jesus is the light of *your* world, the forgiver of *your* sins, the one who called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light.

At the center of the gospel is a God who loves, a Savior who forgives, a light that dispels darkness. Jesus proclaimed this gospel to the world. He proclaimed this gospel to you. He is the light of your world. He is the light of your life. To us, his disciples, Jesus gives an identity and a purpose saying, "You are the light of the world" and, "Let your light shine."

Let Your Light Shine

God has a purpose in mind for those whom he has made the light of the world. In Christ Jesus God established the light of the gospel in the world. Through Jesus' disciples, past, present, and future, God perpetuates the light of the gospel in the world. As disciples of Jesus, this is our identity. You are the light of the world. "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God." And our purpose, "that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9-10).

God's purpose for us is to let our light shine and declare his praises. How do we do that? Does that mean we should assemble in the middle of Walmart and sing doxologies? Does it mean we must shoehorn a message about Christ's death and resurrection into every conversation we have? It's good to sing praises and talk about Jesus, but in these verses, Jesus told us that we don't necessarily need to do anything. Salt doesn't need to try in order to be salty. It just is. A city on a hill doesn't need to strive to be seen. It's built there for all to see. It cannot be hidden. A lamp doesn't need to give it all it has in order to give light to a room. It simply shines. All three of these things Jesus mentioned do their job simply by being what they are. So also, we as disciples of Christ do our job by simply being who we are. Christ has planted the light of the gospel in our hearts which naturally shines and produces fruit in our lives. We declare his praises each and every day just by being who we are.

At the same time, Jesus said, "Don't think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets." Don't think that God's standard of perfection is null and void. Jesus was perfectly clear. "I tell you the truth," he said, "until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished" (Matthew 5:18). What are we to make of this? On the one hand, Jesus told us that we don't necessarily need to do anything to be the light of the world, for we already are. On the other hand, Jesus told us that we are not to think that the law is null and void. What, then, are we, Jesus' disciples, to do?

Jesus told us one important point. "I have not come to abolish the law or the prophets, but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17). For us, this changes everything. First, God gave us the law and the prophets so that we might realize that we were walking in the darkness of sin. Then, Jesus came and fulfilled the law, always walking in the light of perfection, taking away the punishment of sin, and crediting the perfection that he's won to you. Jesus' gospel of the forgiveness of sins and his gift of faith through the Spirit has called you out of the darkness and into the wonderful light in which you now live. You are no longer lost in the darkness of sin, you are set free in the light of the gospel. When the law convicts you of walking in darkness, you can reply, "Yes, I am a sinner. Yes, I have walked in darkness. But I have a Savior. I have my Jesus who has forgiven my sin and called me out of the darkness into the light. He has given me new life in him and named me the light of the world."

This is who we are. Forgiven. Redeemed. The light of the world. Who we are changes how we think about the law and the prophets. Jesus did not abolish God's law, he fulfilled it. Therefore, the law no longer condemns us, but rather it guides us. The Holy Spirit working through the truth of the gospel has made us the light of the world. Christ encouraged us to let our light shine and God's Word tells us exactly how to let our light shine in a world of darkness. We let our light shine by being a voice of comfort to the many who mourn. We let our light shine by being honest among those who cheat. We let our light shine by showing love to the unloving. We let our light shine by being kind to the hostile. We let our light shine by upholding the truth of God's Word in a world that ignores it. Above all, we let our light shine because Christ gave us the light. God has called you by the gospel out of the darkness of sin into the light of his love. Jesus, your Savior, has made you the light of the world. "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

Amen.