February 9, 2020 • Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

“…For the World”
Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

Isaiah 58:1-12
Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God.

“Why do we fast, yet do you not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? 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?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. 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. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose 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.

Matthew 5:13-16
“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. “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 the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

For eight years now, there’s one Sunday a year when we worship in two places. We’re here in this sanctuary AND we’ve got a great team from our congregation and our Preschool participating in this year’s Home Run for Kids up on San Vicente Blvd. to benefit the work of Upward Bound House. They started at 8 a.m. with communion offered to one and all before starting off on the 5k walk/run.

And you know, our work in this community to end homelessness through Upward Bound House now far surpasses our original vision. If you’re newer to the congregation, you may wonder: why Upward Bound House? What’s that? Well, if you parked in our parking garage this morning, you parked under it. Senior Villa, home to low-income seniors, and Family Place that fronts on the other side, on 10th Street, which, thanks to be tireless work of its expert dedicated staff, has now graduated 1,800 families, including over 1,400 children, off the streets and into permanent housing. 3200 children who tonight, will not be sleeping in cars, in cardboard boxes, on relatives’ sofas, in abandoned buildings…children and families who have a bright tomorrow full of hope and promise, thanks to the safe shelter they received here, and as importantly, the supportive services and training essential to maintaining a thriving family life. To date, over 95% of our families continue in permanent housing. All this due to the tireless efforts beginning almost 30 years go by members of this congregation in partnership with the City of Santa Monica and HUD.

So with a little well-deserved pride, we can say that we as a congregation have made a huge impact on many lives, many families, many children.

And so today, we’re praying with our voices, we’re praying with our music, and we’re praying with our feet. Thanks be to God!

Last Sunday we heard Jesus blessing his disciples in the Beatitudes. Remember…blessed are you who are poor in spirit, you who mourn, you who are meek and full of mercy, you who hunger and thirst for righteousness and peace. Blessed are you, he told them, for you are children of God and you will be comforted and satisfied and you will be made whole.

In the passage we hear this morning he goes on. You who are blessed by God, he tells them, you children of God: you are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Let your light shine that others may see what you see and join you in giving thanks and praise to God.

Jesus is very definite here in what he says. He doesn’t say…you might be like salt, maybe you can become salty someday if you’re good…no! He’s letting us know that God has already worked this transformation within us. Once you were simply people, he’s saying. NOW you’re salt! NOW you are light! SHINE!

What is he telling us about who we really are? What is he telling us about the transformation God is working in us? What is he teaching us about our transforming presence in the world?
You are the salt of this earth, the salt for the land, salt for the whole of humankind, other translators put it. It’s important to remember the value and importance of salt in Jesus’ time. Salt was a precious commodity. Salt was metered out for pay—hence our world “salary” from the Latin salarium.

Salt was used to enhance the taste of food and to preserve food. Friendships were sealed by tasting salt together. Salt was rubbed on newborn babies for medicinal and cleansing purposes.

The scriptures of the Old and New Testaments put the emphasis on how we live as God’s people, on how faithful we remain to God. Salt symbolizes this as well. In those times, salt was also a symbol of covenant. A people’s saltiness was a measure of how faithful they were in remaining in covenant with God, the God who never abandons his covenant with them.

When Jesus first used salt as a descriptor for his disciples, all these meanings and properties of salt would have come to mind: seasoning, preserving, enhancing, cleansing, heralding friendships, conferring value, remaining steadfast and true.

Let’s turn our thoughts for a moment to Jesus’ second descriptor of disciples: You are the light of the world. Remember, he had said this of himself: I am the light of the world. Now he says it of his disciples: You are the light of the world. What does this tell us about who we are?

For our folks who are outside worshipping and praising God with their feet, even in the rain showers, that light is what brings forth life for the trees and grass along their route. It is through photosynthesis that plants use energy from the sun to transform water, carbon dioxide and minerals into food when the plant is exposed to light. Photo-synthesis means light and synthesis, coming together, combining to bring forth the life of the earth, through the transformative work of the light.

You see, both salt and light are, in fact, transformative agents. They cause awesome things to happen. They bring disparate elements together to bring forth life and health and food and sustenance and beauty.

This is a beautiful, powerful, poetic description of who we are as disciples of Jesus Christ. Jesus is so direct in this passage. He’s not coddling us with phrases like—we ought to try and become salt, or we ought to try and be like light or if we work at it we might be a little bit like salt and light for the world. He’s not pointing us towards what might become someday. NO—he insists that we are the salt for all humankind. We are the light for the world.

Spiritual maturity as disciples is a matter of manifesting who we are, of being what God has created us to be—transformative agents, salt and light, bringing forth life and health and beauty and blessing for this world and for all of humankind. As disciples, we pull things together, bring people together, bring resources together to make possible the shalom, the wholeness, the healing and justice and peace God intends, in human hearts and in this world.

We cannot always know just how we will be called upon to let our light shine, or what darkness it may illumine for another, what dark places of the human heart or of this world it might open, what joy it will bring, what comfort or hope, what new synthesis it will make possible. We cannot know when our salt will be the transformative agent that brings people together.

Yet even now, we rejoice in the salt and light present here in the life of this faithful congregation. We rejoice in our youth, who so generously let their light shine for us all to see. We rejoice in all those who made our most recent Community Meal happen—baking, cooking, serving, sharing. We rejoice in all—young, old, in-between, children, babies in strollers, pets—who are participating in Home Run for Kids to support the children and families of Family Place at Upward Bound House. We rejoice in all those who have persevered through the years, from the time of streetcars in Santa Monica, and remain a vital and vibrant life-giving witness in our community to this day.

And in these critical times in the life of our nation, we rejoice in being a community that opens our doors and hearts to welcome in our Jewish and Muslim neighbors in prayer. We rejoice in being a congregation welcoming one another, across whatever differences might otherwise separate us, to bind us together in a strong community of love where ideas and hopes and fears and dreams are shared, where all lives are treasured, where everyone matters, and where God, our loving, life-giving God, is real.

Going forward, we pray each day to claim our God-given identity as salt and light in every thought and action, for this world and for all of humankind, that we may live without fear, live with great hope and joy, into the glorious future that God, even now, is preparing.

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Live faithfully, people of God. Be salt and light for the world! God is faithful. And God’s promises are true.

May all who see join in giving God thanks and praise.

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