

Sermon on Isaiah 58:1-12, Matthew 5:13-20  
Fifth Sunday of Epiphany, February 5, 2017  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

When I was a child, one of my favorite cartoons to watch after school was the *Rocky and Bullwinkle Show*, starring Rocky the Flying Squirrel and Bullwinkle the Moose. Two of the recurring animated characters on the show were Mr. Peabody and Sherman (a boy and his dog – who happened to be a well-educated professor), who travelled back in time to different eras of history in his invention, the “Way Back Machine”. If you and I were able to take a time machine back 2,500 years, we might find the world to be frightfully similar to the anxiety we feel and witness today. In the world to which God called the prophet Isaiah, the kingdom of Israel and Judah lived under constant threats from neighboring powers. The northern kingdom of Israel was annexed by the Assyrian Empire, known for their cruel, ruthless army. Judah and its capitol Jerusalem lived in constant fear of being invaded, and so paid tribute to the Empire. Into this context the prophet Isaiah appeared, blaming Israel and Judah for their rebellion against God, which had resulted in the misfortune and tragedy of Assyria’s invasion. So Isaiah exhorted the leaders of Judah to obey God’s call to live lives of faithfulness and justice. But the misfortunes continued, as the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and sent the people into exile in Babylon. After a generation of suffering, Cyrus the Persian defeated the Babylonians and let the exiles go home. So chapters 40 – 66 of Isaiah is known as the Book of Consolation.

When the passage we read in our first lesson was written, Isaiah preached a vision of hope to a people still reeling from generations of suffering and defeat, mixed with the hopes and fears of returning to a homeland which had been destroyed and overrun. The whole experience had been a test of their faith. While they continued their religious traditions of observing Passover, prayer and fasting, worship and sacrifice, I’m sure many wondered what good it was to have faith. Where was God when their enemies had been victorious? Did God hear their prayers? Did it do any good to pray, fast, and sing praises to God?

Isaiah, the prophet of the Lord, God’s messenger, called them out. He said, *“Shout out, do not hold back! Lift your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion and their sins.”* The people had asked why they fasted, yet God didn’t see them, humbled themselves, but God had not noticed.

Isaiah called out their hypocrisy. *“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 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, ...to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house?”*

That was the fast that the Lord wanted to see, Isaiah said. God could not see humility and fasting until it translated into acts of justice – feeding the hungry poor, and letting the oppressed go free. Traditions of religious faith and worship are meaningless unless they are lived out in real life in the world.

Five hundred years later Jesus was called by God to proclaim this same message, as he taught his disciples and followers about how to live faithfully in God’s kingdom. Last week we heard the blessings Jesus had for the most unexpected people: the poor in spirit, those in mourning, the meek, the righteousness seekers the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who were persecuted on his account. To these same persons, who would one day risk persecution to follow him and proclaim the righteousness and justice of God, Jesus said: *You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world.*

Not “you should be” the salt of the earth. Not “try your best” to be the light of the world. YOU ARE the salt and the light of the world. This is who you are, your identity as a follower of Jesus, a disciple of Christ, the baptized, the ones who seek God’s righteousness and deeper, life-changing faith.

Oh, and guess what? Jesus was not only talking to twelve disciples, 500 disciples, or the crowds who came to him that day on the side of the mountain. Jesus is talking to you and me, and all who seek to follow Jesus today!

So what does it mean to be the salt of the earth? In Old Testament times salt was not only used as a seasoning - it was a valuable mineral. Salt was used to “seal” or “salt” a covenant agreement, to make a relationship binding. So salt would be exchanged as a sign of covenant, symbolically preserving them. In Roman times, soldiers were paid partially with salt, as salt was used as money. When Jesus told his disciples that “you are the salt of the earth”, he made it clear that they made a difference in the world. And just as a pinch of salt makes a great difference to the flavor of a dish, so even one faithful disciple can make a great difference in the world for good – as we saw the prophet Isaiah call the faithful in Judah and Jerusalem to live out their fast with justice. It’s not salt itself – this is only a metaphor for faith lived out in the world.

The parallel metaphor Jesus used for his disciples’ witness is light. Light in the darkness has been a symbol for God’s creative work from the beginning of creation, in Genesis – when in the darkness, God said *“let there be light”*. The gospel of John spoke of Jesus coming as a “light in the darkness of this world.” So Jesus told his disciples that “your witness, your words and actions” are like light to all the world – they will be seen by everyone, apparent to all.

Now, salt can lose its flavor. Jesus knew that. Salt can be mixed with other minerals and be diluted, losing its preservative power. The same is true of the Church, and of disciples. Our words and actions can be diluted by our own confusion, when we speak or act wrongly, or when our words and actions are misunderstood. Churches can send mixed messages about judgment and grace.

The same thing happens with the image of light. Sometimes what good we might do remains hidden. It's like Jesus said, nobody lights a lantern and puts a bushel basket over it – you let your light shine so others can see! However, sometimes we don't dare to speak, and let others do all the talking, even when they are wrong or have bad intent, who misrepresent the gospel. Sometimes those voices speak of hate, and exclusion against immigrants, refugees and Muslims, and the whole world sees that! Jesus said to *“let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”* **You** are light, so be light, and shine. Very much like Isaiah said, *“when you loose the bonds of injustice, undo the thongs of the yoke, let the oppressed go free, share your bread with the hungry, bring the homeless poor into your house, and clothe the naked...then your light shall rise in the darkness, ... your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt, and you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.”*

In recent weeks and months there have been many instances when people of faith have had to stand up, speak up boldly, to bring the light of truth into an increasingly dark and scary world. We have been called to stand up alongside immigrants who are threatened with deportation and welcome Muslims and refugees, to be witnesses who call for justice in the workplace, for living wages and earned sick and safe time for those who don't have health insurance or sick leave at their jobs. Some of you have been bold to do this on the steps of the church, out in the neighborhoods, to speak up at City Hall or at the State Capitol or to march for women, for refugees and immigrants, and respect for all human beings – it has been very powerful and life-changing. It has made a great difference in peoples' lives for good. This is one way that you are salt, you are light! In fact, some of you have even been red hot chili peppers out there!

But being called to be a witness, like salt or like light, doesn't necessarily mean to be a *public* witness – though it can be. Witness can be done quietly, through actions of care and love for others, as a living example of faith. Many of you would rather not call attention to yourselves, and are not comfortable getting “out in front” of people, and I respect that. Your quiet support and prayers are very much needed! We all can have our individual, unique ways of being a “quiet witness” - this has often been the “Lutheran way”! Multiply this by thousands and God changes the world, through us. Thousands upon thousands of Lutherans caring for the earth, teaching the faith to children, hosting families without

housing, sponsoring refugees, writing letters to representatives, such quiet witness with integrity and faith has held the world together and healed many wounds in times of tragedy or war. Your quiet witness can be just as important as the sermon preached to hundreds of people, probably more!

But whatever you do, Jesus said, don't stifle your witness with silence, or inaction, or let your shyness hold your tongue and cover up your light. Because the world is in great darkness right now, and it needs the light of truth spoken in love! There are so many people who are now afraid, or confused, losing their hope, experiencing hate, and they need you, your voice, and the voice of the whole Body of Christ, the Church, to speak words of hope and love with the light of truth.

For then you will be called "repairers of the breach" that divides a broken world, the restorer of streets where people can live in safety, harmony and peace. *You are the salt of the earth, and lights to the world.* Jesus has said so, and he calls you friends, children of God – called to bring God's light to other children of the world, beloved just like us. So let's go out there and be salt, and light. Amen.