

9 February 2020
Epiphany 5

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“You are His Salt and Light”

Text: Matthew 5:13-20; 1 Corinthians 2:1-16; Isaiah 58:3-9a

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

That is your Christian vocation. This is how Jesus uses His Christians. This is not what you have to be, but who you are. This is not what you do, but how Jesus is using you. And lest you think you're not those things, you are. Jesus says you are. And you are who God says you are. His Strong Word does what it says. His Word brings into being that which was not. His Word speaks reality into existence. So if He says you are, you are. And this is what you are. Salt and light. His salt and His light.

So Jesus sprinkles you where He needs you to preserve a rotting world. For that's what salt does. And so in the midst of sin, the Lord sprinkles His Christians. In the midst of death, God sprinkles His Christians. In the midst of evil, Jesus sprinkles His Christians. That in the midst of all these things, there be His forgiveness, life, and love. That truth be spoken. That these things not run rampant in the world, that sin not gain the upper hand, but that God be present in them, in you. And maybe you are not even aware of it, Jesus using you in this way. But consider where you are in your life and the people God has gathered around you. Coincidence? Chance? Accident? No. Because in you, the Lord is present in those places. To bless.

And so has Jesus put you to be His light as well. ***No one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket***, Jesus says. ***You put it on a stand, so that it gives light to all the house.*** So you. Jesus has given you His Spirit and His Spirit has enlightened you with His gifts. So God is putting you in the darkness - and maybe in some really deep, dark places! - to light them up. That the darkness not overwhelm, but people can see in it. So that people can see the light of hope in the midst of despair. The light of life when confronted with death. The light of forgiveness when all they know and hear is the darkness of condemnation. And the light of love in the dungeon of hate and fear. You bring these things with you because you bring God and His Spirit with you wherever you go. And again, maybe you are not even aware of it, Jesus using you in this way. But this is who you are, Jesus says. Not what you have to be (that's Law), but who you are (that's Gospel). How Jesus is using you.

Which doesn't mean it's easy. It's *not* easy being in the midst of sin and death and evil and darkness. But maybe it's a little easier to live in those places and be who you are knowing that this is God's plan. That Jesus hasn't forgotten about you and He's not punishing you. Rather, He needs you there. To be His salt. To be His light. To preserve and enlighten a very dark and rotting world.

And this, honestly, flummoxes me! I can't really figure out why God chooses to do things this way when it seems to me there are a lot of better and easier and more effective ways He could do it than me! Because salt and light? Really? Me? And maybe you're thinking the same thing. That you're not very salty and not very bright and not very much use to God. But the God who can work all things for good, can even use us this way.

And at the same time I think this shows God's fatherly heart. Some of you have heard me talk before about how children want to help their parents and parents like to have their children help them. When you're little, for example, you may want to help vacuum, even if you're too little to do it. And even though Mom could do it better and faster and easier if she just said no - she loves the help, because she loves her child. And fathers too. Building, digging, fixing. Little hands don't do it as well, go slower, and tire faster. But he loves the help, because he loves his child. So maybe think about it that way . . .

The Apostle Paul wondered at this, too. Marveled. We heard him say today: ***What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him.*** What our Lord has in mind for us. Not only in heaven, but already here and now. Or in another place (Romans 11:33) Paul writes that God's ways are *inscrutable*. There's a good word for you! Beyond our figuring out. He's just not like us. And that's a *good* thing.

And speaking of Paul, of course you know how God used him as His salt and light in the world - greatest missionary of all time! But a couple of things about that. First, it wasn't Paul's decision, or doing. Jesus made Paul who he was. Jesus put Paul where He did. Jesus said ***you are***, and Paul was.

But this, too: Paul, it seems, didn't think himself very salty or very bright. At least, not among the Corinthians. Did you hear what he said today: he came to them (or God put him there) ***in weakness and fear and with much trembling!*** And he says, he ***didn't have lofty speech or wisdom.*** No great "I have a dream" speech from Paul. No great new paradigm-shifting philosophical system that all were amazed at. Just ***Jesus Christ and Him crucified.*** Just forgiveness of sin, life from death, good in the midst of evil, love in the midst of intolerance and hate. Christ was present there in Paul and through Paul. His salt and light.

Now think about *this* too: *who has Jesus used as salt and light for you?* When you were stuck in sin, overwhelmed by the darkness, surrounded by evil, in need of forgiveness,

craving hope, confused, uncertain, lost, alone. Who did Jesus sprinkle into your life? Through whom did He give you a ray of hope? If you think about it long enough, I'll bet the list is long and somewhat surprising. And you realize that with God, there's always more going on than meets the eye. Much more than you know. Like on the cross. The ***Christ crucified*** that Paul proclaimed. An innocent man hanging with your sin. For you. A condemned criminal who is really the Son of God. Defeat that is really victory. A dead man who is really the life of the world.

But perhaps you're *still* thinking about how all this doesn't seem quite possible. Because really! You're not very salty salt. That on any saltiness scale, you're that salt that only deserves to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. And light? Not very bright, and blown out far too often by sin. And honestly, looking at yourself, that's what you *should* think. You're not good enough. You're not bright enough. You're not strong enough. If Jesus had said: You have to go out there and be my salt in the world! You have to go out there and shine as brightly as you can! And if you don't . . . Well, we don't. Not as we should. We are like what Isaiah said today. Not only do we fail to do the good we should, but the good we do we often do for the wrong reason. Our ***righteousness*** certainly does not ***exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees***, those most scrupulous keepers of the Law. And it's not even close. So salt and light . . . Yeah, we're not qualified. We're not good enough.

But that's exactly why we shouldn't look at ourselves *but look to Jesus*. And why we shouldn't listen to the accusing voice of the Law and satan and our conscience, *but listen to Jesus*. Because you're not what you do; you are what Jesus does and says you are. His Strong Word does what it says. His Word brings into being that which was not. His Word speaks reality into existence. On your own, you are lost, not good enough.

But you're not on your own! God's Word - and God's Word made flesh! - speak a different reality and bring a new reality and a new life. For He not only says you are His salt and light (and so you are!), He calls you His child. A member of His heavenly family. He calls you forgiven and righteous (and so you are!), for He gives His forgiveness and righteousness to you. He calls you His, and you are; and your life eternal, and it is. The waters of Baptism did all that for you. The Word of God in that water took you from darkness to light, from sinner to saint, from death to life, from hell to heaven. The Christ crucified that Paul proclaimed, your Saviour, did that for you.

And this: it is quite true, as Jesus said, that we cannot make unsalty salt salty again, just as we cannot make the dead alive again. We can't. But Jesus can. A death and resurrection Jesus can. The Word of God can. In fact, that is His specialty! And He does. For you. *I forgive you all your sins*, He says. That is, you are salty again. Do not fear. *Take eat, take drink*, He says. That is, I am yours and you are mine. You are alive in Me and I in you. So where you are, where I put you, I am. Being salt. Being light. In you. Through you. In ways you can perhaps see, and ways you certainly cannot. You are not

alone. *Lo, I am with you always* (Matthew 20:28). And you will be with me.

So maybe these words today put a new spin on your life. Help you see things in a new way. A *mind of Christ* way, as Paul says today. And maybe even give you joy and confidence when you're in those dark places in life. That maybe you're there to be salt and light for someone else. Or did Jesus put them there to be that for you? We may not know why everything happens as it does . . . but how good to know that your Saviour is working for you and through you. That He has plans for you and that you're important. Important enough to go to the cross for. To make you His child. His child. His Christian. His saint. Forgiven. Justified. Sanctified. Glorified. Baptized. Absolved. Bodied and Blooded. Cleansed. Salted. Lighted. Put. His work, not yours. His Word, working in you. So look to Him. Listen to Him. He said so. And what He says is so.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.