
IT'S A PROMISE, NOT A COMMAND

Believe it or not, there were no televisions in JESUS' day.

- Nor were there any movie theaters.
- The primary form of entertainment and the most common way of relaxing in the evening was storytelling,
 - That's why JESUS told so many parables and spoke pictures—storytelling was the way you communicated ideas, suggested morals and values, and challenged the way people thought.

Today, we like stories and narratives, too.

- In fact, that's what most movies and TV programs are: stories told to entertain, but also to challenge or direct our thinking.
- We like visual images and pictures.
 - But, more-often-than-not, these are already interpreted for us with captions or explanations, and we don't always get to figure out the point on our own.

But when we consider the distance of time that separates us from the culture of the biblical period, and we may have great difficulty understanding just what JESUS meant when HE said some of the things recorded in scripture.

- That's one of the benefits of going to church—it can help us to better understand what the words of JESUS back then mean for us today.

Take for example some of JESUS' words in today's gospel.

- "You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world."
 - In this case, we probably have some idea of what JESUS is saying—that each of us can make a difference in the world.
 - But I think an absolutely crucial element of these words to keep in mind and allow to shape your thinking is this:
 - It's a promise, not a command.
 - JESUS isn't saying, "You *should* be the salt of the earth and the light of the world."
 - Or, "You *have to be...*", let alone, "You'd *better be...*".
 - Rather, HE is saying, "You *are...*", as in "You *already are...*".
 - Even if you don't know it; even if you used to know it, but forgot; even if you have a hard time believing it or don't believe it at all,
 - you are the salt of the earth and the light of the world!

JESUS is making a promise to HIS disciples about their very being.

- But, again, HE'S not commanding it, let alone threatening about what they should be doing.
 - It's a promise, not a command.

And I think that is important to say because the world so often presents GOD as more of a divine law-maker and rule-enforcer than a generous gift-giver.

- And, if we usually experience GOD that way, or hear about GOD that way—always setting expectations that we rarely can live up to—then we tend not to find as much inspiration and energy in our worship experiences and our faith lives as we might like or hope.

So, it is important to understand that in this passage, JESUS is making promises and giving out gifts.

- You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.
 - This, like the beatitudes of last week, is sheer blessing.
 - And, like last week, it is about identity, about our very being, which in turn leads to doing.
 - You *are* the salt of the earth. You *are* the light of the world.
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Think about that for a moment and look deeply into your life and see if you can discover the variety of ways GOD has used you to be salt and light. *[Pause]*

- If you're having trouble doing that, let me suggest that you think about or look up the Women's March of January 21, 2017.
 - Regardless of your opinions, observations, or objections, this was a testament to and an embodiment of what you do when you truly believe that you are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.
 - You don't question it. You don't second-guess it. You just go and do it.
 - That's what JESUS is saying.
 - HE doesn't say think about it.
 - HE doesn't say, "You will be," or "You may be," or "Try to be."
 - HE says you just are: "You are salt and light." Period.
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So, what does that look like from an individual perspective?

- It looks like Don and Len visiting someone who is unable to come to church.
- It looks like a group serving dinner to veterans at their hall.
- It looks like Jen inviting Rose to come and worship with her.
- It looks like the Congregational Care team taking time to visit an infirmed individual so her family can have some free time away.
- It looks like Jan sharing messages from our church with others who might benefit from them.
- It looks like volunteers working to build homes for those who are on limited budgets or completely unhoused.
 - And I could go on and on, because you—YOU—all of you—are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.
 - Your words of encouragement to others.
 - Your faithful works at your places of employment.
 - Your volunteering to assist others.
 - Your prayers offered or promises made and kept.
 - These things are salt and light.

Granted, these things in and of themselves may seem small.

- But don't forget: small is what GOD most often uses to change the world.
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You are salt and light.

- And that matters because our world desperately needs to be blessed with the gifts of salt and light right now.
 - Check the headlines. Listen to the news.
 - There is an unusually pervasive sense of dis-ease in our world and divisions evident in our country.
 - Which is why it is important for you to know that you are salt and light and are blessed to let your light shine all the brighter.

Yet I need to acknowledge that we won't all agree on exactly what being salt and light looks like.

- I have some pretty strong opinions on that and you probably do, too.
 - So where do we go?
 - Is encouragement just in general the best that we can do?
 - Is silence that makes room for all to feel comfortable the best that we can manage?
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Let me share two thoughts on this:

First, do not underestimate the importance of this congregation being a place where people of all different viewpoints can come together.

- While for the most part we look pretty much the same as each other in terms of culture, ethnicity, and economic diversity,
 - we may be very diverse in terms of political views.
 - But that doesn't mean that we can't be a place that brings together people, who may differ on approach and goals to being salt and light,
 - yet who are committed to praying for deeper understanding, for greater wisdom, and for endless courage to speak and act in line with our faith, and for each other.

Second, let us not forget that we follow a LORD who blessed all kinds of people the world didn't and doesn't always call blessed.

- We serve a GOD who sends JESUS and those who follow HIM to those who mourn and are meek; who are poor in spirit and merciful; who hunger and thirst for righteousness.
 - These are the people GOD blesses and invites us to bless.

And as we continue this journey through Matthew's gospel this year, we will hear our LORD encourage us to discover *HIS* presence among those without shelter, without adequate food and clothing, and who are imprisoned and lonely.

- These words can help to shape us with a shared sense of calling and values, even if we may continue to wrestle with how best to live out those values here and now.
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This is a difficult time for many people and for many reasons.

- We need salt and light in this world.
 - And the amazing thing, and maybe crazy thing, is that GOD has already provided it,
 - in and through the people seated here today.

The words of JESUS are that you are loved;

- you are blessed;
- you are salt and light—already!
 - And GOD isn't done with you either.
 - GOD will continue to bless the world through your prayers, your words, and your deeds as Jesus' faithful disciples.
 - JESUS is making that promise today, and our world is waiting to be changed by you.
 - JESUS will use your words and your life to make that happen,
 - because you ARE the salt of the earth and the light of the world.