



The Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist

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HOMILY FOR THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY February 5, 2017

Let us pray. Gracious and wonderful God, you call us to be your light amid the darkness of injustice and oppression. Help us find ways to shine your love into the hearts and lives of those here and beyond us, that the whole world may see your compassion and mercy; we pray in Christ's Name, the Suffering Servant. Amen.

Last week, shopping at the grocery store, I was disheartened, troubled, and very sad to see a mother shaking her young son by the arm and angrily shouting at him that he was a bad boy and worthless. I was reminded of studies by psychologists which tell us that for every negative message children of elementary school age hear about themselves, they need to hear ten positive messages to restore their sense of self-esteem. Children, to put it another way, become what they are told they are. Call a child bad long enough, and he or she will believe it and begin acting out with bad behavior. In the same way, call a child loved, precious, and helpful, and the child will grow into that identity and behavior as well.

All of this came to mind as I read the Holy Gospel for today. Jesus speaks to his disciples of every time and place and says of them, of us: "You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world," present tense, notice! Jesus doesn't say, "If you want to become salt and light, do this..." Jesus isn't saying, "You should be the salt of the earth and light of the world" or "You have to be," let alone, "You'd better be!" Rather, Jesus declares of us "You are," as in, already are. In the same way, in our baptism, the very Spirit of God came to the water in the font and gave us our identity as children of God, sons and daughters of the Almighty—you the sister, you the brother, I the brother of Jesus Christ! This identity as God's very own, beloved, precious in his sight, comes from God as pure, unconditional gift, the free blessing of grace! And, from that baptismal moment onward, the whole of our Christian life becomes living out our identity as child of God, being salt, bringing the flavor of God to the world, being light, brightening the world with God's love.

Isaiah, God's prophet, speaks of God's agenda, what God esteems, in our First Reading. To express their devotion to God, God's people fasted from food as a way to please God. But God, speaking through Isaiah, declares that the religious observance God esteems above all is "to loose the bonds of injustice...to let the oppressed go free...to share your bread with the hungry, to shelter the homeless, and clothe the naked"—always finding ways we can bring the transforming flavor of God and the bright splendor of God to the world. Or, put another way, to constantly, perpetually, ask ourselves the question, "What would Jesus do?" And then, having answered, to do it! Who should I vote for is to ask "Who would Jesus elect?" Shall I march for human rights, or not, is to ask, "Would Jesus?" What do I think of the refugee ban is to ask, "What would Jesus, my Master and Lord, say and do about this?"

And here's the thing: we won't all agree on what being the salt and light of Christ looks like exactly. This fact has been driven home to me in recent weeks in talking with people whose political view and vote, I have discovered, is the opposite of mine, yet people I care about: family members I love, fellow pastors I respect, and faithful laypeople I cherish. That's why congregations, most certainly ours, I am proud to say, are to be places where the faithful gather with different ideas of how being Christ's salt and light is manifested, but places where each sister's or brother's

dignity is honored, where we pray for one another and a deeper understanding of God's wisdom and will, where we affirm and cherish and focus on all that binds us together, unites us, makes us one as the family of faith. My calling, as I see it, is not to tell you how to think or vote—certainly not—but to share by the Holy Spirit's prompting and leading what I discern the Bible says God is thinking, and how God is acting, and how God is calling us as his people to be the salt and light of Christ. Know this, anytime you think I am preaching on an issue you deem controversial, it is only because I think that you have right to know how I, as your rector, hear the Gospel speaking to the issue, where I believe the Gospel stands. This does not mean, however, that I am saying that you must agree with me, that you have to believe as I do on a controversial issue.

As I read Jesus' words, "a city built on a hill cannot be hid," I thought back to my vacation in Spain several years ago, traveling by car through the mountains in total darkness, save for the lights of villages, miles apart, sparkling like diamonds in the blackness of the night, and how very comforting their light was for me—as light, most especially God's Light, always is.

I remember also, President Ronald Reagan describing our United States as a beacon, a light on a hill for all the world. As Reagan bade the presidency farewell in 1989, he had this to say: "I've spoken of the shining city all my life; windswept, God blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds, living in harmony and peace. And if the city had walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and heart to get here. That's how I saw it and see it still."

There is yet another beacon held high, this one in New York harbor. We call her affectionately Lady Liberty, with her beacon of welcome and freedom for those we are tempted to keep out. My ancestors were numbered among them as immigrants. Lady Liberty spoke to them, and still speaks today, words which for me embody, in part, what it means to be Christ's light for the world. Emma Lazarus penned these words on Lady Liberty's pedestal: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

Of course we, all of us, want vigilance in keeping our country safe for its citizens. Can we agree on that? But do we want to keep out a four-month-old child who was ready to come here for heart surgery, whose grandparents are U.S. citizens, but who was banned and barred because she was born in Iran? I say, "Please, no!" Can we agree on that also? Thankfully, this baby has, finally, been given permission to come for her surgery! And the Lord says, "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice...to let the oppressed go free...to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your home, and when you see the naked to cover them...?" How shall we be the salt and light of Christ in these times? We answer individually, but also, collectively as a Christian community of faith, ever called to be a beacon of Christ's Light.

Hear the promise of Jesus in our Gospel: you, St. John the Baptist Church, individually and together, you are the light of the world. With such a high and urgent calling, we can only pray the Lord God to help us, to guide us in love, not fear, to reach out to the neighbor in need, down the street or across the globe. As we do, we become increasingly the light of Christ, the salt, the light Jesus promises we are! "You *are* the light of the world!" Let us become increasingly what Jesus says we are. He believes in us! "Little light of mine, let it shine, let it shine, let it shine!"

† In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.