

EPIPHANY 5, YEAR A

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I like to think that Jesus was quite the storyteller. The great teacher utilizes imagery and language which resonated with his audience, drawing on his surroundings and on the life experience of those who drew near to hear him. I think I've said before that I imagine Jesus had a rich deep voice, like a Morgan Freeman or James Earl Jones, one of those you could listen to for days without losing interest or growing weary of the sound. Whether in streets of Jerusalem or on the hillside in Galilee, he wove a continuous thread of teaching and preaching.

Today the story picks up where we last left Jesus and the crowds, on the Mount of Beatitudes giving the Sermon on the Mount. And as was his custom, he calls forth two images which every generation can appreciate, salt and light.

First, there is salt. One of its chief properties is to season food, giving flavor to that which is otherwise bland and uninteresting. We have all probably had a meal that was missing the salt. Edible, yes, but dull. The disciples would have known that truth too, and so calling them to be salt is like asking them to season the world around them, to take that which they have received in the teachings of Jesus and spreading them around to give flavor to life itself.

Salt is also a preservative. In an age before freezing and household refrigeration, salt was a necessity. Drawing out the water in which bacteria grow and multiply, salt dries or cures food to keep it safe. This too was common knowledge, and the work of being salt in this world is the work of preservation. In spreading the fullness of the Gospel, the truth proclaimed by Jesus is itself safeguarded from decay and disease even as it prevents unhealthy growth by that which seeks only to devour and destroy.

Salt also makes us thirsty for more. An appropriate seasoning of salt leads us to want more of the same. And at the same time, just as it draws out the water of food, it pulls the moisture from our mouths and our bodies. This twofold thirst is not unknown to the spiritual life. Having been given a taste of the Gospel, a sip of the spiritual milk, we long for more of the truth, for more of the well-seasoned meat found there. And as we take it in, the water which harbors and enables the growth of sinfulness is slowly pulled from our lives also, so that in the thirst which ensues we may in turn drink from the living waters of Jesus Christ.

Salt gives us seasoning and preservation and a thirst for something more. But what happens when salt loses its saltiness? Now whether Jesus was referring to the rather impure salt of the day or stating a paradox about the near impossibility of NaCl losing its essential characteristics is one of those questions we can ask later. But the question at hand of "What does one do with un-salty salt?" is a very real moral and theological issue.

This is where we can get in trouble, where we as the church have gotten in trouble before. If we are the salt of the earth, from where does our saltiness come? It is not ourselves, because we can't bring about the effect on ourselves. Which means it must come from Jesus. Seasoned by his Word and Sacraments, we are preserved and our thirst is quenched.

To lose our saltiness then comes in one of two forms. On the one hand, we can try to change the formula. We can remove what is hard or what we don't personally like from what we've been given. Which points to the second option, which is that we can try something else, either as a supplement to that which we've excised from the equation or as different alternative altogether.

In either case, any 1st year chemistry student can tell you that when you change the elements, you change the solution too. It's an all or nothing equation, and at the end of the day, salt is salt. The best substitutes in the world might suffice for our food, but they will always fall short for our souls.

Which means that the only answer to the question of how to restore our saltiness, is to return to Jesus, so that in turn we are made to season the tasteless, to preserve the vulnerable, to direct the thirst towards the waters of life. And we can do this because though we are the salt, it is not ourselves that we offer to the world. We give ourselves to Christ, that we may in turn share Christ with the world.

Paul says to the Corinthians, “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling; and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”

And it is the power of God which provides the salt and light of the world. And light, like salt before it, has many beneficial qualities known and treasured by all. Light scatters the darkness making it possible to see the way which lies ahead (even if it is usually only a step or two at a time). Light warms everything it touches in mood and temperature, lifting the spirits of those drawn to it even as they are comforted by the warmth it provides.

As the light of the world, we are to do battle with the darkness, driving it back from before us by the power of God itself. That is why we are called to be set upon the hill, that by day or night we might serve as a guidepost to others, a boon in their journey, and a comfort amidst the encroaching shadows.

All of which, salt and light alike, points to a wider point for you and me to recall. We have not been called for the sake of ourselves alone any more than we’ve been called to make our stand alone. Too often have we heard in the midst of preaching and teaching the world over how important a personal relationship with the Lord is while not often enough have we heard how important his church is, his body is, his kingdom is.

Yes, we must know Jesus and his Gospel to minister to others, and that terrifies those of you who he is calling to go back out into the world to talk about more than weather and politics. We think we must have all the answers to all the questions, that we must be qualified to be called. But the Gospel is filled with examples of those who God equips after he calls them. Even today’s Sermon on the Mount is Jesus teaching the disciples after they’ve already left everything to follow him.

What we need then is this. This is our starting place and this is the end. It is here that we are seasoned by Scripture, preserved by the Spirit, nourished by the living waters of Baptism and the Body and Blood of the Christ, enlightened by the light which came into the world. Jesus is simply asking us to come to him, to see what he does and hear what he says, to let him transform us to salt and light.

We come to hear the story from the master storyteller himself, the Word incarnate. We do this together so that we may do that together so that when we struggle to remember the words of the story or to live its truth, we may help each other out, fill in the gaps we can’t remember on our own. And when the week is spent and our saltiness is weak and our light is fading we come back here together once more to hear the story anew, to be transformed into the image and likeness of Christ, so that we can do it all over again, so that we can like our Lord and Savior before us tell the story that we live and live the story that we tell.