

5 Epiphany Year A 2020  
The Church of the Redeemer  
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Isaiah 58:1-12   Psalm 112:1-10   1 Corinthians 2:1-16   Matthew 5:13-20

When the prophets speak to us through the words of scripture, a Paul Simon song comes to mind:

The words of the prophets are written on the subway walls  
and tenement halls  
and whispered in the sound of silence.

While many have pondered what the song means, Paul Simon himself said that it was about “youthful alienation” in general and that a significant part of the reason that it resonates with millions of people is the song’s simple, singable melody. [What does Paul Simon know (about his own song?) ☺]

Perhaps modern prophets are those ignored voices of graffiti, words depicted by pictures, their meaning whispered to an unhearing world. That fits with the songwriter’s comment that the song also means that no one is listening [to him or] to anyone. The words from the prophet Isaiah definitely are not whispered. The melody, if you will, is simple:

“Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet!”

To tell God’s people how miserably we have failed in following God’s laws.

It is a plea from the people we hear next:

‘Why do we fast, but you do not see?  
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?’

It is brave to ask God such a question. God is brutally honest in his answer:

Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight...  
Such fasting as you do today  
will not make your voice heard on high.

An appropriate fast addresses injustice, lifts others’ burdens, and sets people free. In other words, God can tell when our fasting is for show, for ourselves and not for God. It is no wonder that prophets are universally disliked, and that truths are

depicted “on subway walls,” only whispered to unhearing ears. It is hard to hear such truths.

We miss the point of Isaiah’s words, however, if all we hear is condemnation. Look at these strong words from the standpoint of a compassionate God who knows that we fight a battle on earth every day in the world and in ourselves. The promise is there: when we act in sincere faith and see the face of God in everyone, then we will know that God is already with us: “the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.” When we despair God will answer: “Here am I.” God wants to know abundance and joy.

The gospel of Matthew continues to show us what faithful discipleship looks like. Jesus declares us to be the salt and light of the world. We are not similar to salt and light; Jesus we *are* salt and light.

In the ancient world salt had at least three uses: as a seasoning, a preservative, and part of God’s covenant with Israel. We are called today to be salt in God’s new covenant in Jesus Christ. Leviticus, Exodus, , the books of Numbers and 2 Chronicles all reference salt being part of God’s covenant with God’s people. (Leviticus 2.13, Exodus 30.34-35, Numbers 18.9, 2 Chronicles 13.5.) The covenant comes into fulfillment when we live as faithful disciples who walk in Christ’s light and bring the kingdom of God to this world as a way of life.

In calling us the salt and light of the world, Jesus is giving us a task to do. We are to preserve God’s Word in this world, to be agents that spice things up. We are to shine Christ’s bright light, knowing that we might be the only light that shows someone the way through a dark place or time. Sometimes we, too, do not see our way through the dark, but we live with the certainty that Jesus’ light is with us and in us. We see discipleship through the lens of Christ’s death on the cross, knowing that Jesus loved us all the way to the cross. We bear that cross in the chrism of baptism; we are joined to the covenant of new life. Jesus has claimed us as his own. We are salt and light: purposeful, shining, and holy. Our call is not easy. As the late preacher Fred Craddock wrote:

“Those who hear Jesus’ teachings are struck, some quite deeply, by the level of ethical conduct expected of his followers. Some, to be sure, become his disciples rather casually, half-listening, really hearing him only later when crises or guilt plunge them into a serious reflection on their baptismal vows. Others hear him quite clearly, pause to consider alternatives and then in penitence and prayer move into his way with fear and trembling. Still others, hearing in Jesus’ words a path too steep and finding in themselves insufficient willingness for such a life, turn sadly away.” (all Fred Craddock)

Brothers and sisters, do not turn sadly away. We find the very deepest joy in a life with Christ. With all of our faults that Christ's light uncovers, we are capable of fulfilling all that God will have us do and be.

We are called to see Christ in everyone meet. We are called to serve others. We are called to love our neighbor in the same way that we love ourselves. We are called to be powerful agents of change – salt – and not a mere flavoring that loses its impact over time. We are first God's beloved children.

Do not despair that we are not perfect disciples. Our discipleship happens in the footsteps of the Lord and in our flawed humanity. We are called first to be God's beloved child and partners in caring for all of creation. We cannot see and measure righteousness, but God knows our hearts. We are loved, accepted, challenged and changed by our discipleship. Go ahead and stretch in every way of being Jesus' beloved disciple. Give generously of your resources. Fast from all that is not God. Pray for one another. Pray to see God in that one person you cannot stand. Turn your "busy" and your pain over to God so that you can be present in Christ in this time, in this moment, in this action of discipleship. Encourage one another, just as you are doing.

The promise is here: <sup>10</sup>if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. <sup>11</sup>The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

Let the whispers of the unheard and the eyes of those who do not see be transformed ears and eyes filled with joy in the Lord. Let our silence be transformed into prayer and not denial, into hope and light and not lament. Help us, Lord, to be salt and light, to bring your will all that are and all that we do.

In Jesus' name, *Amen*.