

5 Epiphany, Yr. A  
February 9, 2020  
Isaiah 58: 1-9a, Matthew 5:13-20

Light is both a powerful reality and a powerful metaphor. If you go all the way back to the beginning of Genesis, you'll see that the very first recorded words of God were "LET THERE BE LIGHT." Light it comes before all else. On the physical level, light enables us to see. And because we understand light that way, it's easy for us to understand light when it's used as a metaphor. Then it's about light as understanding, or enlightenment. But light is also essential to life itself. I'm thinking here of photosynthesis, the process by which energy from the sun is converted into the chemical energy used by plants. We get what John was talking about in his Gospel when he says Jesus Christ was the life and the light of the world.

Today, in this section of Matthew that is still part of the Sermon on the Mount, we hear Jesus saying that his followers are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. We know what it means to be the salt of the earth; we often hear people described that way: he or she is the salt of the earth. We mean, of course, that they are solid, dependable, generous, grounded. And the light metaphor is also easily accessible. Light – it enables us to see what's what, it shows us the reality of our lives and of what's going on in the world. Think of the lighthouses that surround us up here: they show danger and safety to the sailors; what to avoid and how to safely navigate. They show reality and only the most foolhardy would ignore what's seen by their light. Remember the story of the naval officer who got the command of a battleship. One stormy night he saw a strange light rapidly closing with his own vessel. He signaled that it should alter its course. It didn't, but he received a message telling him to alter HIS. This went on for a bit and finally he sent the message again, stating in caps, that he was the CAPTAIN of a battleship. The reply this time was from a Seaman third class who said, "you need to alter your course; I am a LIGHTHOUSE!"

So if we think first of Christ as being the light of the world, illuminating the essential truths of who God is and who we are, what do we see? Because that illuminates our job description as well. I submit that we see that God is about love, that he loves all creation, that he wills only good for us, that he wants us to follow in Christ's footsteps, living in the only way that will make us happy and blessed. That's what's laid out in the Beatitudes: being humble, being merciful, being peacemakers, longing for justice and righteousness and God's kingdom, but it's also laid out in Christ's life and teachings which are all about compassion and healing and generosity. Do you remember the story about the little girl who was a star in the Christmas pageant and her mother asked her what she had to do and say? And her wonderful answer: Oh, I don't have to do or say anything, I just have to stand there and SHINE. It might be easier if we could just dress up as stars and stand there, but in order to become that light, we need to make

conscious decisions, first to accept that as our vocation and then to live it out, moment by moment, day by day. So starting with what Christ illuminated by his life, in order to become the light that we already are, it means that we need to exhibit by our lives - by our words and actions, by how we treat everyone that we come in contact with, by how we spend our money, by how we vote – all of it, that we have become followers of Christ and that we are shining with his light, not for ourselves, you'll notice, but so we're giving glory to our Father in heaven.

I've perhaps been talking as if this is all quite easy to do, but I don't think that it is. And I think one of the hardest things we have to come to see is that God really does love all creation, that God loves each and every one of us. And that means, of course, that we're to do the same. And I think that's always been hard and perhaps even harder in this age of extreme individualism, when everything in the culture says that it's all about ME, that we're to live putting ourselves FIRST. But that's not the message of Christ. Interestingly enough, coming from the American Vision class, that wasn't the message of the founders either. They had a vision of a country where the common good was the goal. I asked the group last week how they would articulate the American vision and one person said, "THERE WOULD BE A SMILE ON EVERY FACE." On first hearing, that sounds a bit flippant, but on consideration, it's right on. Because if there was a smile on every face, it would mean that the kingdom would have been realized; that each person would have enough, each person would be able to live in accord with God's desires for him or her, that each person would have what they needed for a flourishing life.

To get there, we have to come to realize not only that everyone is loved by God, but that we are all connected and thus, in some way, responsible for one another. Isaac Luria was a Jewish Rabbi in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, living after the Jews had been expelled from Spain, undoubtedly trying to figure out why there was so much suffering, why things were so broken. His explanation was that when God created light, it was so powerful that the earthen vessels that were to contain it simply broke apart and that meant that there were shards of light scattered throughout all the creation. There are at least two things that follow from that. One is the Jewish idea of tikkun olam which means that our task is to gather up those shards and in doing so, to mend our fractured world. The second is that each and every part of creation, including all our fellow humans, contains a shard of God's light. That's the part that can be challenging – to look at one another and see that shard of light, that animating breath of God right there, right in front of us. Along the same line, the Buddhists have the tradition of Namaste, that bow to one another. What's behind that is the conviction that the God within me is acknowledging and bowing to the God in you.

The simple yet demanding truth is that we are here to make a difference. That God has placed us here in this time and place to be a light to the nations. Sometimes that will

mean talking and explaining our faith, but just as a light simply shines, illuminating everything, the way we live should be explanation enough: maybe it's being patient when you would like to be anything but, maybe it's lifting someone's spirits with a kind word, maybe it's giving a moment of relief from poverty or loneliness. One act at a time, one day at a time. And here we surely remember the story told by Loren Eiseley about walking on the beach early one morning and seeing a great many starfish that had been washed up during the night. And seeing one young man, going from one starfish to the next, hurling each back into the sea. When Eiseley pointed out that there were so many that the young man couldn't make any real difference, the answer came as another starfish was thrown in, I MADE A DIFFERENCE TO THAT ONE. One day at a time, one loving and compassionate and just act at a time.

A quick note here about the Isaiah reading. All this is what he's talking about as well; about true religion. Religion that worships God by knowing the mind of God and then living it out here on earth. Ritual has its place, but it's meant to enhance our worship so that our hearts can be transformed, so that we can loose the bonds of injustice, let the oppressed go free, share our bread. Then, God says, when we're doing that, our light will break forth like the dawn. Yes. Amen.