

February 5, 2017
Isaiah 58:1-12
Matthew 5:13-20

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

To follow Jesus can mean many things to many different people. I suppose these first disciples were still trying to figure this all out in their minds. Just what were they doing? They had a perfectly good gig going before they left everything to follow this man. Their world certainly must have been in a bit of a topsy-turvy state. What would tomorrow bring? Where were they going next? Where would their next meal come from? One can only imagine the wakeless moments they must have encountered or the behind the scenes conversations when Jesus wasn't around they had with one another possibly questioning what they had gotten themselves into. They had lives prior to Jesus issuing the call to follow him. They had vocations, families, an identity – a way of life. And now what? What next? Who were they now that everything had changed? What was their mission?

I suspect Jesus knew what was going on in their minds. Perhaps, he had overheard those conversations when the leader wasn't around pondering just what he had gotten them into. And Jesus doesn't waste anytime letting them

know exactly what he has in store for them in saying, “You are the salt of the earth” and “You are the light of the world.” You here is plural so while saying it to each individual he is also saying it to the group, which seems to imply their being salt and light is rooted in their connection to one another. Together, they are salt. Together, they are light. And it’s now – not at some point in the future. He doesn’t say, “You will be salt and you will be light” but he makes it crystal clear their vocation from this time onward is to be salt and light in the world. And that’s who Jesus calls us to be as well. It’s a very part of our baptismal identity and vocation as immediately following the baptism a member of the congregation proclaims, “Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” There is a reason why that proclamation is made by a member of the congregation because it invokes our connection together. Yes, individually our lights are to shine but also corporately as the church.

In the midst of the uneasiness and uncertainty of the future Jesus enters in and gives the disciples purpose, meaning, and a mission. In a similar fashion God did the exact same thing with God’s people in the book of Isaiah. This was a people who had turned from God and subsequently found themselves in a foreign land under Babylonian control. They were surrounded by peoples worshipping

false deities. They had felt abandoned from God and more than likely were trying to figure just who they were. Their future too was in a state of flux. And here in Isaiah we begin to find the people returning home from exile. Home to a smoldering and ransacked Jerusalem. Home to a Temple that lay in ruins. Home to an empty throne in which a Davidic king was to always reign supreme offering leadership, protection, and justice. What would tomorrow hold? How would they move forward? Where was God at? And they, too, it appears began to bicker and question just what was in store for them next. It appears the people were trying to get back to normal and be the people God had called them to be. In the midst of unrest and uncertainty they took up the very faithful practice of fasting, which was an important part of worship and also an important practice in times of mourning. Yet, it appears this practice was not bearing with it the fruit God had intended it to bear and actually was doing the exact opposite leading the people to turn inward, bicker with one another, and even contributed to conditions which led to the demise of the other. God comes onto the scene and reminds them while the practice of fasting is important it can truly only be transformative when it entails outward movement toward the other. Fasting, or any other act of worship for that matter, God says is pointless if it does not ultimately turn our eyes outward to see our neighbor and then to care for our

neighbor; especially those in need in any way. This is the fast God undertakes and it is only when the people learn this that they become truly united to God's will and work in the world and transformed into the people God has destined them to be. It is then, the text tells us, that their light shall break forth like the dawn.

Many people find themselves in a very similar situation today. Our world and our nation is in a state of unrest. The future is a bit unclear. We don't know what tomorrow will bring. And onto the scene comes Jesus. Onto the scene comes our God reminding us of our vocation and identity as salt and light. Reminding us that in the midst of everything we have a calling – to proclaim the news that God has already saved the world in Christ. To proclaim the news God is a God of all people. To be ears that listen for the cries of the world. To be the hands that reach out to those in need. To be a people of hospitality and welcome. To be Christ's church that often runs so counter-cultural to the powers of the world.

With this vocation calling comes the challenging statement Jesus makes at the end of our passage today as he tells his disciples, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Is there really any hope then because the scribes and Pharisees were pretty faithful in upholding the law even though Jesus will consistently try to

teach them the same lesson God taught Israel. Adhering to the law or pious activity is useless if it doesn't move us to look outward and truly be salt and light to the world. God is in the transformation business and truly following Jesus is about losing ourselves for the sake of the world. It is about being Christ to the other. It is about finding Christ in the other. Jesus is right in saying we will never enter the kingdom of heaven because on our own it is impossible but with him all things are possible and perhaps once again he is setting the disciples and us up to more fully understand the concept of God's grace. Of God's unconditional love. He knows that but he still issues the call and makes it clear, "We are salt." "We are light"

Yet, at times it's tough to think our light can really make a difference. We are just one person or we are just one small congregation in West Branch, Iowa. Are we really making a difference? I read this week that if the earth was flat one small flickering flame would be seen 30 miles away barring any obstructions in its path. When connected together just think how much more visible all of our lights would be. Our lights do matter. Each and every time we drop a quarter in the tube to help feed 20 students in our community each weekend. Each and every bag of food we take over to the pantry. Each and every article of clothing we hand out from our clothes closet. Each and every meal we serve on the fourth

Sunday. Each and every time we speak up for, send an email, or write a letter when we see injustice prevail. Each and every time we send our benevolence dollars off to the larger church to help support ministries that reach beyond our synod, state, and even borders of our country through our shared partnership with the ELCA Malaria Campaign, ELCA World Hunger, ELCA's HIV and Aids ministry, Lutheran Disaster Response, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services and so many more. We can't give up. We must push onward because that is who God has called us to be. Our light matters because it is none other than the light of Christ. Amen.