

“Salt and Light”  
Stouffville United Church  
Sunday, February 9, 2020

Isaiah 58, Psalm 112, Matthew 5

Jesus said, you are the light of the world and the salt of the earth.

When I turn on my rock salt light, two things are happening – there is light and there is salt. People claim that by placing a rock salt lamp near your desk where you work or where you live, that the ions released from the salt crystal through the warmth of the light offers healing to those in proximity. In church, we gather to absorb the ‘light and salt’ faith that God in Jesus has placed in us. As my colleague Rev. David Lander once said, “As salt and light, we are to absorb all those divine ions God sends to us in worship, and to go forth as ionized light, to shine so brightly that others can see their way through chaos and challenges. Worship energizes us!”<sup>1</sup>

But where do we take that light and that salt when we leave Sunday worship? Does the bushel basket of life, filled with busyness and distractions, manage to cover our light so none can see it? Does the salt we represent become useless and something to be thrown away? What happens with our light n our salt between Monday to Saturday?

American theologian David Lose reflected on the disconnect between what happens in church on Sunday morning and what carries over into the Monday to Saturday of our week. In his book, *Preaching at the Crossroads*, he includes a diagram which shows a church on the left, with a bright sun shining above it – and on the right is a drawing of buildings and offices and houses, with a cloud over it. And in-between there is a gully with a stick figure person straddling the gully – one foot on the Sunday morning church side, the other foot on the Monday to Saturday side of work and home and reality. He writes of the picture, “As you can see, they’ve drawn a chasm between their faith and their everyday lives ... all of this leads me to the ineluctable conclusion that while we’ve certainly obeyed the commandment to “observe the Sabbath,” we’ve unintentionally done so in a way that has devalued everyday life ... [We] have learned, as much by what we’ve *not* said as by what we have, that the sure and certain location of God’s activity is church and that a “calling” refers only to activities performed there.”<sup>2</sup>

And yet God wants more.

As a commentary underscored, “Cities in which so many go to church on Sunday ought to show the results of their worship in the quality of the lives from Monday through Saturday. The worship of God easily becomes a reflection of the values of the culture ... Many look for congregations that offer comfort rather than challenge. Churches begin to value survival more than courage.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. David Lander, *Gathering A/C/E/ 2019/20*, 48. Used with permission.

<sup>2</sup> David Lose, 71-72.

<sup>3</sup> FOTW, *Homiletical Perspective*, 317.

Our passage from the 58<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah, is the opening verses of the voice that biblical scholars call the ‘Third Isaiah’. The Book of Isaiah is divided into three sections, each one led by a different voice but collectively known as Isaiah. In the Third Isaiah, the exiles have returned to the ruined city of Jerusalem. As my Jewish Study Bible offers, “Although some exiles return to Zion after the Persians defeated the Babylonians in 538, the land of Israel remained for the most part in ruins.”<sup>4</sup> The people are piecing together what life they had before their city was plundered and they were taken as prisoners and dragged to the Babylonian desert to wait out the years of fighting. They’ve returned to the streets they lived on, the temples they worshipped in, and are remembering the ways they used to worship. But it seems they have forgotten part of what God asks. Yes, fast as a personal act of devotion, but fasting without justice, is not what God desires.

God wants more.

Isaiah shouts to the people, “Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them?”

Feed the hungry and clothe the naked. Does this sound familiar? Jesus said the same thing, “I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” (Matthew 25:42-43)

Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. You are the light of the world. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand.” We are called to be salt and light, not just in here in this sanctuary, but mostly out there. In here, we gather together as a community of faith, as disciples of Jesus, to understand what it means to be light and salt, and how to be that light and that salt generously, and spontaneously. We are led outside these four walls to be that light, to be that salt, in a world where clouds hide the light, where salt is left in containers in backs of closets. I read this week, “The reading for today from Matthew 5 implies two fundamental questions of life: Who are we? What are we to do? These questions hang in the back closets of the minds of many individuals and congregations today.”<sup>5</sup>

In Isaiah, God has these harsh words for the people who have returned from exile and are trying to remember what the ritual of worship was about, the temple still lying in ruins about them. The people in Isaiah’s time will “have to rethink what it means to worship the God of Israel in a “post” world – post-temple, post-exilic.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Jewish Study Bible, 882.

<sup>5</sup> FOTW, Homiletical Perspective, 333.

<sup>6</sup> FOTW, Pastoral Perspective, 316.

Isaiah's words firmly tell us that it's not enough to bow the head like a bulrush, to lie in sackcloth and ashes. Because in the end, it's not about us. But it's much more about them – the people we meet on our journey. It's about being salt and light to all we meet when we leave these doors and go into our week. Yes, gather in worship, recharge your ions, but don't leave it there.

Andrew Connors wrote, "Worship is the most important thing we do together. It is the place that forms us into the people of God. It is the place where we 'inhale' God's love and grace, so that we can exhale God's love and grace in a broken world in need of redemption. That critique that God offers through the mouth of Isaiah is that the more Israel has become self-conscious about its improved worship life, the less it has remained open to God's vision for the community."<sup>7</sup>

Yes, it is about the worship, but God wants more from us, more from us as a community of faith, as a church. Douglas Hare, in his Interpretation commentary, double downed on the essence of light and salt as a community effort: "You are salt, yes, but for the earth, not for yourselves. You are light, but for the whole world, not for a closed fellowship ... the community as a whole is challenged to fulfill its corporate mission of serving as salt and light for the world. Such a task cannot be accomplished by independent individuals. It is one we must work at together."<sup>8</sup>

Isaiah tells us that when the people hear God's words, and add justice to worship, 'Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly.'

*You are salt to be used,*

not left in a container in the back of the closet.

*You are light to be used,*

not hidden under a lamp shade.

*Go be what God calls you to be,*

not just here in this moment of worship today,

but more desperately,

into the reality of the world's Monday to Saturday.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> FOTW, Pastoral Perspective, 316.

<sup>8</sup> Interpretation Commentary, 44.