2/8-9/20 Salt and Light Rev. Amy Haines

Matt 5:13-16 Scout Sunday

How many of you have an ordinary flashlight at home? Does it work? Is it bright enough?

How many times have you reached for such a flashlight in your life only to have the batteries fade on you, or the light not even turn on? The flashlight doesn’t help if it doesn’t work.

Nowadays, companies hand out these little portable LED flashlights. My kids love to play with these, but I remind them not to shine the light in each other’s eyes. They are great to fit in a purse or backpack or even a pocket, and they shine a lot brighter than the battery-operated lights. Until the light goes out. The flashlight doesn’t help if it doesn’t work.

This is my son’s scout headlamp. As it fits around your head or hatband, these are great to stay hands free or to run around camp. I haven’t figured out exactly why it has a red light as well as a white light, but I am sure one of the scouts will enlighten me. These are a great asset on a campout—until the AAA batteries run out. The headlamp doesn’t help if it doesn’t work.

Light is important. It guides our way on a dark path. It offers comfort in a dark room. It offers hope in a dark world.

How many of us get grumpy in the gloom and grey of winter, or after days of clouds and rain?

We yearn for sunshine and blue sky.

I am not sure I could live near the Arctic Circle, where they are just now beginning to see a few minutes of daylight after close to three months of continual darkness.

.. In Tromso, Norway, for example, from mid-November to mid-January, the sun does not rise above the horizon. On a good day they may only get two hours of indirect light around midday.

From August until mid-November, residents can count on losing 10 to 15 minutes of light each day until the depths of the winter solstice. At this time of year they are slowly beginning to add a little more light to each day.

 -- Homileticsonline.com 2-4-96 “Lamplight vs. Starlight”

My sister claims that I go through the house turning lights on, while she goes through the house turning lights off. I confess- I like light! I yearn for light.

And when the world around me becomes too dark, figuratively and literally, I cling to the light that is Jesus. Today, I give thanks that Jesus is God’s gift of love and light shining in the darkness of our world.

Jesus reminds us that there is more to life than what we see or hear from the news or social media. In a dark world of loneliness and fear, violence and partisanship, Jesus offers us the light of God’s presence and God’s ways. Jesus encourages us to look beyond divisive rhetoric to find boys and girls helping others, as both scout oaths declare.

Jesus invites us to look for those who live by God’s ways- the caring, the hopeful, the forgiving, the giving. Finally, Jesus summons us to receive, reflect and share God’s light with others.

At first glance, Jesus’ words in our passage today are strange words. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

Notice he does not say “This is what you *ought* to be doing, this is how you *should* be living, this is what you *must* strive to become.” Instead, Jesus proclaims “You are *already* the salt of the earth. You are *already* the light of the world.”

These are words of affirmation—and calling. They are words of Jesus to the people of God that can be as powerful as the words of a scoutmaster to a scout. I see this in you. You are loved. You are valued. You have great gifts. Now go and share who you are with others. Go and show others what it means to live being helpful and friendly, to live as those who are trustworthy and courteous.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus’ words today are part of his foundational message called the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus began his teaching with blessings, then offered an invitation to live by God’s kingdom ways rather than the world’s ways. God’s ways are not simply a checklist of do’s and don’ts, but rather a way of living in relationship with God, one another, and all creation.

As Jesus often does, he uses the ordinary of life to envision the surprising ways of God.

Bread and wine become signs of redemption. A mustard seed describes the power of faith.

A father lovingly running to welcome his prodigal son re-imagines God’s deep love for us.

Today, Jesus uses ordinary, essential elements to declare who we are:

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

Salt is an ordinary element, that nowadays we take for granted. We don’t recognize its value, as we are told to lay off the salt shakers by our doctors and loved ones. We don’t think twice about wasting salt in order to melt the snow and ice on our roads and porches.

Yet in the time of Jesus, salt was understood to be of priceless value. Salt was used as a seasoning and as a preservative long before refrigeration. Salt was used to bind covenants of faith and in Temple rituals and sacrifices. Salt was used at births and baptisms as a cleansing agent, and on the battlefield as a healing agent. Some cultures even exchanged salt as currency.

The salt trade was so highly valued that often salt was the reason roads were built, taxes were levied, and wars were fought.

In 1930, Mahatma Gandhi led over 100,000 people on a walk of over 200 miles westward to the seacoast. The reason for the march was to avoid a costly salt "tax" imposed by the British colonial authorities. Gandhi shrewdly realized that salt symbolized the unity of all Indians, from Brahmins to Untouchables, because everyone needs it. When Gandhi got to the shore, he made a little salt — his point being salt occurs quite naturally in God’s good world, is essential to life, and thus should not be a high control government monopoly.

-adapted from “The People of God’s World” 2-9-14 homileticsonline.com and

James Howell Weekly Preaching 2-9-20 ministrymatters.com

Salt is a priceless element. And when Jesus declares that we are the salt of the earth, he affirms that we are of priceless value to God. Why else would God have sent God’s Son to live and teach and die and be risen among us?

Yet Jesus doesn’t want us to simply stay and bask in our saltiness. No, Jesus calls us to live into our saltiness, flavoring the world around us with the ways of God, the hope of God, and the love of God.

Think of eating French fries without salt. Think of the taste of a soup without any salt or seasoning. When food is bland, it becomes almost inedible. Salt and seasoning make a difference. While salt is useless in and of itself, salt is valuable when it enhances something else.

I can remember a campout with girl scouts when I was younger, and whoever cooked our hamburgers that weekend added a great amount of salt and seasoning. Those burgers were the best I had ever tasted! I can still remember the joy of that meal to this day.

As we are called to be the salt of the earth, we are called to enhance the lives of others with the love and grace of Jesus. We do so in the ways we act, the words we say, and the attitudes we proclaim.

Yet Jesus warned, “If salt loses its saltiness, how will it become salty again? It’s good for nothing except to be thrown away and trampled under people’s feet.” (v13)

In many ways, what Jesus said was absurd. Salt never really loses its saltiness. And the only time it would be thrown out was if it was mixed with the wrong elements, such as sand.

Here Jesus calls us not to mix with the wrong crowd that would render our salt useless. Jesus warns us not to confuse God’s ways with the world’s ways.

While God will never withhold God’s gracious love, there will be times when we pull ourselves away from God’s love and grace, thus rendering ourselves ineffectual to be like salt of the earth.

Jesus encourages us instead to live into who we are created and called to be.

Beloved children of God. Faithful followers of Jesus.

Salt of the earth. Light of the world.

Light- what hope is in this image!

We depend on light. We are comforted when we are surrounded by light—artificial light, sunlight, the light of a campfire, the light of a flashlight. We love light.

And Jesus invites us to be light to one another, and to the world around us!

I confess, I take light for granted. I flip a wall switch in the darkness, and lights come on.

I turn on my headlights, and suddenly am able to see farther in the distance. I trust my many flashlights to work, including the one on my phone.

Yet imagine the value of light in the time of Jesus. Can you imagine how dark the world would have been at night, and how comforting a lamp, a candle, even a campfire would have been in the midst of a dark world? Electricity had not yet been invented. Oil was a precious commodity. Wicks were not to be wasted. When most homes were single room dwellings, the light of a single small terra cotta oil lamp could dispel the darkness. It may not have even been as bright as our flashlights today, yet it was enough light to offer comfort and hope.

.. Near the eastern end of the Bahamas archipelago there is a mere strip of sand called Castle Island. Castle Island’s lighthouse is its sole source of humanity!

One day, a young man was sailing in the area. He anchored his sailboat off of the lighthouse and swam to shore to exercise his legs on the beach. The lighthouse keeper, Cedric Hanna, was surprised and delighted to have company; he invited the young man to join him for some fresh-caught lobster and a tour of the lighthouse.

The young man climbed the winding staircase to the lantern room at the top of the stairs;

and, he was astonished at the size of the light that signaled safe passage through the maze of shoals and reefs! The light was a tiny kerosene flame - barely bright enough to read by – yet, with the aid of mirrors and reflectors, it was visible twenty-five miles out to sea.

The story of Castle Island reminds each and every one of us that even the most insignificant action or deed on our part - such as giving up our place in the grocery store check-out line to a mother with a fretful baby - or, a short two-line note in a neighbor’s mailbox - or, a smile and a "hello" to a toll-booth attendant – even such faint candles as these, can be multiplied by Almighty God to shine like beacons in a dark world!

-- "Daily Guideposts, 1998”2. "Leaves of Gold," Revised Edition, p. 117.

From a sermon by George Dillahunty, Light Up Your World!, 6/18/2010;

found on sermoncentral.com, adapted

How many of you grew up singing This Little Light of Mine?

*“This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine…*

This song reminds us that even a little light is a sign of hope.

*“Hide it under a bushel, NO, I’m going to let it shine…
“Don’t let Satan blow it out. I’m going to let it shine…
“Shine all over Springboro, I’m going to let it shine…*

Like salt losing its saltiness, thinking of hiding a light under a bushel basket is absurd!

That would either extinguish the light or set the basket on fire!

Yet, how many of us would confess hiding the light within us? Maybe we can do something well yet we don’t want others to know. Maybe others see in us leadership potential, yet we are afraid to risk trying something new. Maybe we don’t want to admit to friends and neighbors that we follow Jesus, so we hide the light of Christ within us instead of shining it as a beacon of God’s light to the world.

.. Warren Hudson of Ontario, Canada, recalls a special Saturday evening worship service at his church when a thunderstorm unleashed a bolt of lightning that plunged the church into darkness. With the congregation seated in total darkness, the pastor felt his way to the kitchen to find some candles and handed out the candles to everyone present.

Persons lit their candles in much the same way as many churches do on Christmas Eve, each person lighting the candle of the person next to them. The worshipers then made their way through the church's winding hallways to the front door.

Warren described what happened next. "Peering out, we could see the rain coming down in sheets.” With traffic snarled, people were running for the nearest shelter. Looking around they realized that the entire city was in darkness. "There in the darkness we stood, a little band of Christians, each clutching a light, not sure whether to venture out into the storm or stay inside the church in hopes that the storm would soon blow over."

There in the darkness the light of truth struck him. In this most dramatic way he realized what it means to be the "light of the world." He commented, "It occurred to me then that this is the temptation I face every day. It is easy to play it safe and be a good Christian in church. It is a lot harder to venture out in faith into the storms of the world."

 --Warren Hudson, adapted by King Duncan, Collected Sermons, www.Sermons.com

Jesus calls us to be a light to the world. To be God’s light offering hope in the darkness of despair. To be God’s light offering love in the darkness of hate. To be God’s light offering welcome to the lost and the lonely.

Living as salt, living as light—this is not a way of living that says, look at me, and how good I am.

Look at how I live for God and country. Look at how I live helping others.

No, to live as salt and light is to reflect the goodness of God that we have received. To live as salt and light is to reflect the ways of the One we follow. To live as salt and light is to allow our faith to be visible in all we say and do, like the bright lights of a city on a hill.

None of us have to shine in big, bright ways. Even a small candle offers light. Even a pinch of salt gives seasoning.

As Ruth Jacobs once said:

You don't have to do great things, but the little things you are doing can be done with great conviction, great wisdom, great beauty and great love.

--Ruth Krehbiel Jacobs, founder of Choristers Guild in “Lamplight vs. Starlight” 2-4-96 homileticsonline.com

So find your ways to shine, find your ways to be salty, find your ways to enhance the lives of others with the love and grace and hope of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

As Scouts, you may find great meaning in living out the Scout Oath and Law.

As followers of Jesus, you may find great joy in letting the light of God’s love shine through your lives to offer hope to another.

A flashlight may not always last. A candle may burn down. Salt may get mixed with something that destroys its saltiness. Yet God’s value in us will never end. And Christ’s call to live as salt and earth will always be a part of our lives.

May we continue to be salty, dear friends, in positive ways that enhance the world around us.

May we continue to let our lights shine all over Springboro, Ohio, and the world, illuminating the power and presence and grace of God.

Let your light shine, this day and always. Let us pray.