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Shining Mountains Lutheran Church, Bozeman, MT
“Let Your Light Shine in the World”
Text: Matthew 5:13-20
Epiphany 5 - 2/6/2011

Grace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were. Amen. (Romans 4:17)

¹³ “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

Dear people of God,

Picture a world that’s shrouded in the deepest of darkness – it covers everyone and everything. But it’s not a physical darkness; it’s a spiritual darkness. This world you see in your mind’s eye, it’s an ugly place full of hurt and pain. The rich beat down on the poor and try to press and pry every last penny out of their hands. Even though there’s food all around, there are people who are dying of hunger in the streets – the people who see them just walk on by. Lying in the byways are souls so destitute that they can’t afford clothing, but everyone who sees them – even their own family members – turn a blind eye. Everywhere you look there are people who feel like God’s abandoned them. Some of them spend their lives pleading that God would show them some kind of love; others just give up hope. No matter how brightly the sun shines in the sky, this world looks dark. And even though you haven’t known any other world, in the deepest way possible you know that this isn’t the way it’s supposed to be.

But now someone new walks into this world. This person *looks* a lot like the other poor wretches walking around, but it doesn’t take long to notice how different this person really is. You see, instead of joining the rich in abusing the poor, this person ignores the rich and sits down in the dirt next to the miserable. When the starving or naked souls crowd around, this new person always seems to have something to give them. The most hopeless sinners that are cast out by society and feel convinced that God has absolutely nothing but anger and hatred for them, this person walks up to them and smiles to say, *Peace be with you!*, and tells them about a God they never knew, a God who would actually call them his sons and daughters. It seems like everywhere this person walks, the darkness of the world runs away and all that’s left is the light of God. Like a sunrise scattering the gloom of night.

Now zoom in on this incredible person. Do you recognize this person? It’s you. It’s the person God’s made you to be when he called you to faith. Isaiah talked about what happens when the faith in your heart is lived in our lives: **Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear.** It was what Jesus was talking about in those simple words, “**You are the light of the world.**” Jesus was saying that those whom God blesses are blessings to the world.

Jesus once said that *he’s the light of the world.* That one’s easy. Jesus is holy and perfect, God’s-Son-become-man. Jesus never sinned, he always showed love, always had the courage to call sin *sin* and the love to proclaim forgiveness for the repentant. That Jesus is the light of the world? Of course. But now Jesus turns to his disciples and says, “**You are the light of the world.**” “**You are the salt of the earth.**” His point was simple: *Light* and *salt* both have a purpose. *Light* – by its very nature – is *seen*. It shows things for what they really are – both good and evil. If it didn’t do that, it wouldn’t be *light*. *Salt’s* purpose was to preserve things. Even though it had a sharp taste to it, it would help stop food from decaying and preserve the good. If it didn’t do that, it wouldn’t be *salt*. *Salt* and *light* – that’s what Jesus said his disciples were for the world.

That might seem like a stretch if you knew the disciples. They were sinners! Peter went back and forth between arrogantly boasting in his faith one day and being swallowed alive by his doubts the next. James and John loved to argue about which one of them would get to sit at Jesus’ right or left side in heaven, as if everything were about them. One day the disciples tried to chase away little children who were coming to Jesus. And Jesus had just finished telling the disciples that they would so often be *meek* and *mourning* and *poor in spirit*. And *they* were to be *salt* that preserves this world by helping people hold on to the good and reject evil? *They* were to be *light* that would show everyone the truth about sins and the truth about the Savior? Didn’t Jesus know them? It seems like a stretch!

That might seem like a stretch if you know yourself, too. Jesus still says that those who believe in him are *light* and *salt*. Your words and actions have the purpose of preserving good and showing the truth. So how brightly does your light shine? How strong is your salt? It's easy to talk about the spiritual *darkness* in the world – even in our own country. The poor go hungry. Every year there are more than a million abortions. More than half of marriages end in divorce; almost half of all children are born out of wedlock. We talk about corruption in the government, the failure of laws, the breakdown of society. But the most shocking statistic? All of that happens in a country where 80% of the people confess to be Christians. Is the problem that the darkness is taking over, or that Christians are failing to be salt and light? When your family members talk about living together out of wedlock, do you try to preserve their faith by warning them about that sin? When fellow Christians start to change what they believe and cut pages out of the Bible, do you bring them back to the truth of God's Word? When someone is lost in guilt or unbelief, do you show them the light of their Savior? Do you live as an *invisible Christian* – in a way that blends in with the darkness of this world – or in a way that leads people to praise their Father in heaven? When salt isn't salty and light gives no sight, there's only one reason – they aren't really salt and light at all. How sad when we don't seem to be anything close to the salt and light that Jesus calls us to be. Doesn't he know us?

But that's just the point. Listen again to his words. **"You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden."** Jesus doesn't say, *"Try to be the salt of the earth."* Or, *"If you work hard enough, you will be the light of the world."* He says **You are**. He doesn't say, *"Don't you see? If you just live like this I'll make you my people. I'll save you!"* He says, *"Don't you see? I've saved you and made you my people. Now be who you are. Let that light shine."*

At the beginning of the sermon as you imagined a world in darkness and pictured someone walking through it who was bringing light to everyone they met, did that person look a lot more like Jesus than you? *"He's the light. He's the one who gave perfect witness to the truth and showed perfect love. He's the one who made a difference in this world."* But never forget where he went after all that perfect love. He went to the cross. He showed the world what true light was. His death showed what the price for every sin is – it showed that sin destroys us and takes us away from God and we *need* to turn from it if we're going to live. And his death showed us a God we never knew – one who loves unconditionally, one who forgives endlessly, one who dies for me and for you.

And he's the one who now looks at you, his forgiven people, and says, **"You are."** **"You are the light of the world."** **"You are the salt of the earth."** And because *Jesus* says it, it's true. It's the wonderful truth the Apostle Paul knew when he wrote, **"I have been crucified with Christ and I know longer live, but Christ lives in me"** (Gal. 2:20). You are the light of the world because the light of the world lives in you. That means your life has a purpose – just as *salt* and *light* change things, you make a difference in this world.

Maybe it feels like that's impossible. After all, the world is so big and sometimes the darkness seems so deep. Do you think you could make a difference? Jesus does. **You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden.** ¹⁵ **Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.** ¹⁶ **In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.** Maybe your light won't wrap around the world. And maybe your life will never seem so important to others that you're like a city lit up on a hill at night that every sees for miles and miles. But you can be a lamp on a stand, giving light to everyone in "your house" – everyone you come in contact with. When they see your love to people who could never pay you back, they'll see Jesus. When they see your willingness to warn against sin and call people to repent, they'll see the truth that sin destroys us. When they see the way your trust in God instead of in money, they'll start to see what it means to know a God who promises to take care of us. And when they see you stumble and fall, and when they see you act in a way that isn't light or salt and isn't the person Jesus calls you to be, what do they get to see then? Someone who repents, and trust in God for forgiveness and mercy. And they'll see Jesus there, too.

Someone once said, *Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words.* It was his way of saying, "Let your actions show others what your Savior is like." The story is told of a homeless man who walked into church. He didn't look like he belonged – wild hair, t-shirt and jeans with holes in it and no shoes. On the day he went, the church was packed and he couldn't find a seat. As he got closer to the front, realizing there was nowhere to sit, he just squatted down right on the carpet. You could cut the tension with a knife. Finally, an older parishioner in his 80s, wearing a three-piece suit – a very godly man and very dignified – began walking with his cane down the aisle toward him. Everyone was thinking to themselves that you couldn't blame him for what he's going to do. As he walked towards the man, the church was totally silent, except for the clicking of the cane. It was like the whole room was holding its breath. Finally, the man reached him. He drops his cane on the floor. With great difficulty, he lowers himself and sits down next

to him and worships with him so he won't be alone. The old man was Jesus for that person. I'm not sure the people remembered the Pastor's sermon that day. But they would never forget the elderly man's sermon.

When you look at the world, what do you see? Do you see the darkness of sin and unbelief? Could you imagine that God loved that world so much that he gave his Son for it – for you? Can you imagine that he loved that world so much that he now gives it you? **Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.** Amen.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. (Ephesians

3:20,21)