

“Call to Action”

“In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

A few days ago, Susan and I went to a local camera store to have some photographs developed. This process has changed greatly in our lifetimes; we used to shoot a roll of film and then take it to a drug store or camera shop to be developed. Today, cameras are digital, and photos are stored in a small memory card that has far greater capacity than any roll of film. Since neither of us is technologically savvy, we needed assistance from the staff at the camera store to set up the reader to view the photos on our memory card. Once we had everything loaded and running, we were surprised to discover that in addition to the most recent photos that we wanted to have developed were many other photos from several years ago, including a 2011 vacation to the Shenandoah Mountains in Virginia. This included a series of photos from Luray Caverns, a spectacular cave system that is a major tourist attraction in that area. As we looked over these long-forgotten photos, we remembered the tour we took and how awestruck we were at the spectacular sights in that ancient cavern. The caves are well-lit with paved paths that are very safe, but our guide reminded us in the midst of the tour that caves can be quite dangerous places. He illustrated this point by warning us that he was going to turn out the lights so that we could experience the total darkness of the caverns; when the lights went out, the darkness was frightening, because we literally couldn't see our hands in front of our faces. After a few moments that seemed like hours, our guide demonstrated the power of light shining in the darkness by lighting a small penlight that he carried. While it didn't provide the same amount of light as the electrical system in the caverns, that tiny light succeeded in cutting through the darkness and gave us a sense of reassurance. It reminded me how one light shining in the darkness can make all the difference.

The significance of light shining in the darkness is a central teaching in the Bible. The creation story in Genesis 1 tells us that in the beginning *“the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep”* (Genesis 1:2). God's first act of creation is to shatter the darkness by proclaiming *“Let there be light; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.”* (Genesis 1:3-4). The light of God's presence is celebrated by the prophet Isaiah as he calls on the people of Israel to *“arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.”* (Isaiah 60:1). The divine light that shatters the darkness is identified with the coming of Christ in the prologue of John's Gospel, which proclaims that *“what has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”* (John 1:4-5).

The light of God's presence that shines in the midst of the world's darkness is the light which God's people are called to bear before others so that they may also know of the light and life that are ours in Christ Jesus. The bearers of the light are those who are blessed because they *“fear the LORD, who greatly delight in his commandments ... They rise in the darkness as a light for the upright; they are gracious, merciful, and righteous.”* (Psalm 112:1, 4). The people who walk in obedience to the Lord's commandments will be blessed by the light that will break forth with healing and hope:

- “Is not this the fast 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, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard. They you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am." – Isaiah 58:6-9.

The light of God's steadfast love that shines in the darkness is the light that the disciples of Christ are called to bear before others in Jesus' teaching from the Sermon on the Mount that is proclaimed to us this morning. Jesus begins his sermon with the Beatitudes, a call to hope that defines blessedness in terms radically different from conventional wisdom and encourages those who are *"poor in spirit, who mourn, who meek, who hunger and thirst for righteousness..."* to *"rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."* (Matthew 5:12). If the Beatitudes are a call to hope, then Jesus' next teaching is a call to action; it *"moves believers from the life of the blessed future to the demands of the present, and so the theme switches from gift to task."* (Dale Allison). The life of discipleship throughout the Sermon on the Mount is conceived as life within the community of faith, a community that is charged with a mission to the world, even though this world will in turn persecute them: *"It is not enough to know about God. As disciples, we have to be the activity of God in the world."* (Karoline Lewis).

Jesus describes this call to action for his disciples by using the image of two commodities that were common at the time: salt and light. In addition to its usage as a seasoning and preservative, salt had many connotations in Matthew's tradition and context:

- Sacrifice: *"You shall not omit from your grain-offering the salt of the covenant with your God; with all your offerings you shall offer salt."* – Leviticus 2:13.
- Loyalty and covenant fidelity: *"All the holy offerings that the Israelites present to the LORD I have given to you, together with your sons and daughters, as a perpetual due; it is a covenant of salt for ever before the LORD for you and your descendants as well."* – Numbers 18:19.
- Purification: *"Then [Elisha] went to the spring of water and threw the salt into it, and said, 'Thus says the LORD, I have made this water wholesome; from now on neither death nor miscarriage shall come from it.'"* – 2 Kings 2:21.

Eating together was called "sharing salt" and expressed a binding relationship. In identifying the disciples as the "salt of the earth," Jesus commissions them to be the blessing with which God has used salt in its many aspects to all people, the "earth" that is the creation of God and the scene of their mission, where God's Will shall finally be done *"on earth as it is in heaven."* If the disciples deny their mission, they will be thrown out as useless, as salt loses its saltiness by becoming so impure, so mixed with elements that it loses its function. *"Salt does not exist for itself, nor do the disciples; their life is turned outward to the world."* (M. Eugene Boring).

As the purpose of salt is in its use, so also does light serve as a commodity that exists for the sake of something else. Jesus uses the metaphor of light to present the disciples as illumination for the world; the primary function of light is not to be seen, but to let things be seen as they are:

- *"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."* – Matthew 5:14-16.

The phrases “light to the nations” and “city on a hill” were both used in Isaiah in reference to Israel’s mission to the nations, a mission that is now to be taken up by Jesus’ disciples:

- “I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations.” – Isaiah 42:6.
- “And now the LORD says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the LORD, and my God has become my strength – he says, ‘Is it too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.’” – Isaiah 49:5-6.

The disciples are “light” not for their own sakes, but for the sake of the world. Their deeds do not point to their own glory but to the glory of God; they are to let their light shine before others “*so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*” (5:16).

- “The salt and light sayings picture mission as inherent to discipleship, as saltiness is essential to salt and shining is to light. With these metaphors of salt, light, and city, Jesus strikes the death blow to all religion that is purely personal and private.” – Eugene Boring.

Jesus’ call to his followers to be the “light of the world” is the call each of us receives when we are baptized and are born anew as “*children of God and made members of the church, the body of Christ.*” (ELW Holy Baptism). As children of God who have been “*sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever,*” the newly baptized are presented with a candle that symbolizes Christ’s call to “*let your light shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.*” As we become members of the community of faith through Baptism, so are we joined to this community’s fundamental mission to be the light that bears the good news of Jesus Christ to all people so that they might live in the blessed hope that the darkness of this world shall give way to Christ own brilliant light:

- “The call of Jesus makes the disciple community not only the salt but also the light of the world: their activity is visible, as well as imperceptible ... The followers are a visible community; their discipleship visible in action which lifts them out of the world – otherwise it would not be discipleship. And of course the following is as visible to the world as a light in the darkness or a mountain rising from a plain.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

The call of every Christian is to be the “light of the world,” to shine the light of Christ before others. It is a light that can make a tremendous difference no matter how small it may seem to us; as a tiny penlight can shatter the darkness of a cavern, so can any small act in which we shine the light of Christ before others make all the difference. The light of Christ that overcame the darkness of death and despair is the same light that can not only brighten a person’s day but give them hope that God is with them, that “*though the wrong seems oft so strong God is the ruler yet.*” (ELW Hymn 824). The light that is ours in Christ Jesus is never meant to be hidden, any more than one “*after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house*” (5:15); as light by its very nature has to shine, as God’s people our very nature is to shine that blessed light before others so that they may experience the light and life of God’s blessed hope.

- “Baptism still involves people in the whole body of Christ. It may mean participation in the routines of a parish, suffering under a nameless burden, carrying on in unaesthetic and

personally distasteful surroundings, loving the unlikeable, accepting the unacceptable. But the test remains in the concreteness and visibility that the new life daily takes. Those who rise from their baptismal water delivered and cleansed now carry the wounds of Christ in the midst of the world so that his glory may shine forth.” – Martin Marty.

Our guide at Luray Caverns eventually turned on the overhead lights so that we could safely resume our tour; but I’ve always remembered the difference that his little light made in the absolute darkness of that cave. As his little light shone before us, may we endeavor to shine the little light of Christ’s love before others: *“Jesus gave it to me, I’m gonna let it shine!”*

Amen.