

“The Unobsolete Testament”

“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.”

The beginning of a new year at university meant that many tasks needed to be fulfilled by new or returning students. It began with moving into their residences, be they on-campus accommodation or off-campus housing. Then came the task of certifying one’s class schedule, making certain that the student was registered for the meal plan, and attending orientation sessions for new students or catching up with old friends for those who were returning to campus. But one task was mandatory for all students: purchasing required texts at the campus bookstore. Each professor would usually post the books that would be used in various classes, and soon there would be lines outside the store filled with students who would soon have their arms laden with new books and their wallets lighter from the high cost of academic textbooks. While there were some used books available at a lower price, in many cases the professors specified that the latest edition of the required textbooks was mandatory, so students were left with no choice but to pay a higher price for a book that was not particularly different from the previous edition. It made one wonder that if the old book was so obsolete, why was it ever used in the first place?

There are many instances where products are advertised as “new and improved” or the “latest edition,” making one wonder what was wrong with the old products. If a laundry detergent advertises itself as making one’s clothes cleaner, then did the old detergent result in dirty laundry? If paper towels are now more absorbent than before, then were we using products that left our countertops wet and filthy? If a shampoo is superior to its former version, then were we once again using an obsolete product that left our hair dirty? While these new products may have features that are better than their previous versions, then is it true that the old products we once used are obsolete and of no value to us?

We often equate “old” with “obsolete” or something that no longer has any value to us; and sadly, this often applies to how people view the Old Testament. While we believe that both the Old and New Testaments are the inspired Word of God, over the years people have often ignored the Old Testament in favour of the New, especially in preaching and Bible Study. In our Lutheran tradition, a reading from

the Old Testament in weekly worship was not included until the publication of the *Service Book and Hymnal* in 1958; prior to that date, only readings from the New Testament Gospels and Epistles were read in worship. Even after readings from the Old Testament were included in worship, sermons were rarely based on these readings from the Hebrew Scriptures; it seemed as though the Old Testament was considered an “obsolete Testament,” a portion of Scripture that had been replaced by what many people saw as the “New and Improved Testament.” For many years it was assumed that “*the Old Testament held little, if any, theological value for the church.*” (Foster McCurley).

While Jesus was often addressed as “rabbi” and observed many of the rabbinic traditions (including sitting in the seat of teaching authority while he gave his Sermon of the Mount: “*When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.*” – Matthew 5:1), many of his opponents accused him of teaching that the “Law and the Prophets,” the central core of the Hebrew Bible, were obsolete. This is an issue that Jesus addresses near the beginning of the Sermon, when he boldly declares “*do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.*” (5:16). “Do not think” is addressed to the faith community to clarify its understanding of Christian discipleship and Torah observance. Jesus does not come to abolish the Law, but neither does he merely affirm the status quo. Jesus accomplishes the ultimate positive action regarding the Law in declaring that he “fulfills” it. In saying that he has come not to abolish but to fulfill the Law and the Prophets, Jesus’ claim to bring to realization all that the Old Testament anticipated. Jesus brings the Law and the Prophets to fulfillment through his entire life, death, and resurrection; he also brings them to fulfillment in his teaching by showing the life to which the Torah pointed; this fulfillment confirms the Torah’s truth.

- “Instead of abolishing the Law and the Prophets, Jesus fulfills them, consistent with their lasting until the new creation comes. Nothing outside the Sermon on the Mount calls the Law into question. On the contrary, Matthew’s Jesus tells the Pharisees that they should practice justice and mercy and faith without neglecting the minor matters of the Law.” – Dale Allison.

Jesus continues his teaching on the validity of the Law and the Prophets in the life of his disciples by using the phrase “*for truly I tell you*” (5:18), Jesus’ way of introducing an authoritative statement that demands the attention of his listeners. Here the phrase introduces Jesus’ teaching on the Law’s enduring validity: “*For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.*” The Law is not abolished

nor is it obsolete, but its role changes as Christ brings forth its deeper meaning. The Law maintains its status as God's revealed Word, and one must continue to teach and obey its commandments; *"Jesus is the authoritative interpreter of the Torah, transcending some traditional understandings of the law and revealing that to which the law is ultimately directed."* (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri). The Law has not been abolished for Christians, even though it is in tension with some of the enduring examples of the "greater righteousness" of which Jesus teaches; disciples must now follow the Law in light of Jesus' interpretation as he warns his followers that *"whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called the least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."* (5:19).

- "Jesus ascribes great honor in God's empire to the one who teaches and obeys the commandments interpreted by Jesus. Throughout the Gospel, Jesus' interpretation emphasizes justice, mercy, love, and faithfulness as central tenets ... the communities of Jesus followers are not to replicate self-interested injustice but are to embody justice that brings life to all." – Warren Carter.

The disciples of Christ must pursue a righteousness that surpasses that of the leading religious leaders of their time: *"For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."* (5:20). Jesus' teaching calls for *"a radical interiorization, a total obedience to God, a complete self-giving to neighbour, that carries the ethical thrust of the law to its God-willed conclusion"* (John P. Meier). It requires much more than mere external conformity to the Law's regulations; *"the standard of right living to which the sermon calls the disciples is not merely to avoid hypocrisy but to live by the standard that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees."* (M. Eugene Boring).

Jesus' teaching that the Scriptures that we refer to as the Old Testament are not to be seen as an "obsolete" or "irrelevant" Testament is seen in his teaching on the life of discipleship, which is conceived throughout Matthew as life within the community of faith, a community that is charged with a mission to the world. It begins with Jesus' declaration to his disciples that *"you are the salt of the earth"* (5:13), rooted in Old Testament teachings on salt as being associated with sacrifice, loyalty, purification, and seasoning:

- "You shall not omit from your grain offerings the salt of the covenant with your God; with all your offerings you shall offer salt." – Leviticus 2:13.

- “Now because we share the salt of the palace and it is not fitting for us to witness the king’s dishonour, therefore we send and inform the king, so that a search may be made in the annals of your ancestors.” – Ezra 4:14-15a.
- “Then [Elisha] went to the spring of water and threw the salt into it, and said, ‘This says the LORD, I have made this water wholesome; from now on neither death nor miscarriage shall come from it.’” – 2 Kings 2:21.
- “Can that which is tasteless be eaten without salt, or is there any flavour in the juice of mallows?” – Job 6:6.

Jesus’ saying serves as a statement and a warning that if the disciples deny their mission, they will also be thrown out as useless: *“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 underfoot.* Salt loses its “saltiness” by becoming so impure, so mixed with other elements, that it loses its function. As salt does not exist for itself but affects other elements, so is the community of believers commissioned to impact the “earth,” the world that is the creation of God and the scene of the disciples’ mission where God’s Will shall finally be done *“on earth as it is in heaven.”* (6:10). *“Salt does not exist for itself, nor do the disciples; their life is turned outward to the world.”* (Boring).

As Jesus proclaims the disciples to be the “salt of the earth” that will bring God’s blessing to all people through their faithful witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, he also declares that *“you are the light of the world”* (5:14). The primary function of light is not to be seen but to let things be seen as they are. Once again, Jesus uses an image that is common in the Old Testament of Israel as a “light to the nations” (*“I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations”* – Isaiah 42:6). Jesus’ disciples are to continue this mission in bringing the shining light of Christ into the darkness of the world in which they live. As a city on a hill cannot be hid, neither are the disciples to hide the light of Christ that they bear from others. Jesus strikes a death blow to all religion that is purely personal and private; the disciple community is not a secret society shielding itself from the world, *“but a city on a hill whose authentic life cannot be concealed.”* (Boring). Jesus then points to the absurdity of hiding one’s light: *“No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all the house”* (5:15). The disciples are called to the active mission of letting their light shine to all, but they do not generate that light any more than salt generates its own “saltiness.” The disciples are recipients of a light from which God is the source and called to the mission of sharing God’s light as God called Israel through the prophet Isaiah:

- “And now the LORD says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, for I am honoured in the sight of the LORD, and my God is my strength – ‘It is 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.

As Jesus' deeds point not to his own glory but to the glory of God (“*When the crowds saw it, they were filled with awe, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to human beings*” – Matthew 9:8), so the purpose of the disciples' engaging in their acts of righteousness and justice before the world is not for their own sake but to glorify God: “*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.*” (5:16). As it is the light of Christ that the disciples are called to bear before others, so shall the praise that results in others seeing this light be directed not to those who bear it but to the source of the light, to the one who declared that “*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life*” (John 8:12). The disciples' own mission is authorized and presupposed by Jesus' own mission and is the continuation of it (“*Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.*” – 10:1).

- The disciples are what they are, not because of inherent potential that they are called upon to recognize and develop, but by Jesus' own word. These pronouncements are thus in continuity with the performative language of the beatitudes. The Matthean readers/disciples are not challenged to try harder to be salt and light but are told that as followers of Jesus they are salt and light for the world. The text calls the reader not to more self-exertion, but to believe Jesus' word and to accept and live out the new reality it has already created in the call to discipleship.” – Boring.

When we gather for worship as disciples of Christ called by baptism into the Church of our Lord and Saviour, we hear the words of Holy Scripture proclaimed to us as they have been to every generation of Christians. While they are ancient words first spoken to people in vastly different circumstances, they are words that are never archaic or obsolete because we believe that they are the living Word from our living God who speaks to us as God spoke to people of old. We believe the proclamation of Isaiah that even though “*the grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever*” (Isaiah 40:8). We believe the words proclaimed in the letter to the Hebrews that as “*long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various*

ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a son ..." (Hebrews 1:1-2). We believe that God's Word is "*a lamp to my feet and a light to my path*" (Psalm 119:105), and that "*God's Word is our great heritage and shall be ours forever; to spread its light from age to age shall be our chief endeavor*" (ELW Hymn 509). When we end our Bible readings with the acknowledgment that this is "the Word of the Lord" and respond "thanks be to God," we are testifying that even though these are words first spoken to ancient people, they are not words that are obsolete or out-of-date but living words that proclaim the good news of our living Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ in this and all generations.

- "It is Jesus as risen Lord who is experienced in the assembly of believers, declared by the word of proclamation, encountered in the sacramental meal, addressed by prayers of praise and petition ... So it was at the birth of the Christian faith, and so it is today wherever Christianity is spiritually alive and identifiably Christian in character." – Luke Timothy Johnson.

As the Word of God proclaimed to us in both the Old and New Testament is not obsolete or irrelevant to our current circumstances, so our call to be salt and light is also a call that is addressed to us when we are baptized into Christ Jesus and called to "*let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven*" (ELW Holy Baptism). It is the light of Christ that we are called to bear, and we endeavor to shine "this little light of mine" so that others may see the light that shines in the darkness, the light that is the hope of the world because it is the assurance that "*in him there is no darkness at all, the night and the day are both alike. The Lamb is the light of the city of God. Shine in my heart, Lord Jesus.*" (ELW Hymn 815).

- "This newness is a gift in baptism ... Such newness moves bodily out into the world; it enters into the real world, not just some spiritual, abstract, chimerical world. How one acts them becomes decisively important – if the Name is to be known and honored. Faith becomes active in love; love means complete devotion to God and then, as Augustine would say, freedom to 'do as you please' in His service." – Martin E. Marty.

I am not certain that the insistence that we purchase the latest editions of our university textbooks was all that relevant to our education or was merely a way for the bookstore to gain more revenue; but there is no doubt that the Word of God that comes to us through Holy Scripture is never obsolete or out-of-date. As Jesus teaches us in his Sermon on the Mount, the Word of God proclaimed through the Old Testament is an "unobsolete Testament," a Word that is still relevant in our time

because it is the living Word from our living God that speaks a word of life and hope to us and calls us to let the light of Christ shine in the darkness of our world so that all people may know that darkness will not win the day, that the light will shine in the darkness because God's Word forever shall abide, because the Word of God endures.

Amen.