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5 Epiphany

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Isaiah 58:1-9a (9b-12)

Psalms 112:1-9 (10)

1 Corinthians 2:1-12 (13-16)

Matthew 5:13-20

This morning the prophet Isaiah is talking about who we **are**, and what we should be **doing** as a result. Sometimes that can be hard to hear. Perhaps because of that, Isaiah, starts off with a bang—or rather a trumpet blast:

Shout out, do not hold back!

Lift up your voice like a trumpet!

Announce to my people their **rebellion**,

to the house of Jacob their **sins**.

Yet day after day they seek me

and delight to know my ways,

**as if they were** a nation that practiced righteousness

and did not **forsake** the ordinance of their God;

they ask of me righteous judgments,

they delight to draw near to God

**God** is the speaker here, saying, loud and clear, that the people of Israel are not getting the message about *who they are*, and *how they should live*. The Torah—Jewish law—is very specific about what God expects from the people, but God’s people are not living out the law, as we will see. And yet in spite of their faithlessness, the people are saying that they want to be close to God—they **say** they’re trying to be faithful, and follow God’s laws, but their actions don’t live out their words. And God is not pleased. But what is going on here? Why is there this disconnect between God and the people?

If we look at the context of this lesson, things might become a little clearer. Isaiah is prophesying here to the Jews that have been returning from exile. At this point in their history they’ve been allowed back into their homeland after about 60 years of being made to live in exile in Babylonia, but they are still an oppressed people: their king is gone, they’re still being ruled by Persia, and their temple has been **destroyed**. Now they’re home again, but they are trying to figure out how to worship God, and how to sustain their identity as Jews in this **new** situation. After living for more than two generations in Babylonia, they’re really struggling to define who they are, now that they don’t even govern themselves in their own country. And they’re trying to figure out how to worship God in a place that had always been about **temple worship**—but remember, they don’t have a temple anymore. So we can see that there could be good reason for all kinds of confusion here, the people ask God,

“Why do we fast, but you do not see?

Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”

They're asking a question that I think we all ask from time to time, "God, why aren't you answering my prayer?" In this particular situation God answers: "Look, you serve your **own** interest on your fast day."

The people are serving their **own** interests. They're not serving God, they're serving themselves. They're fasting, they're wearing sackcloth and sitting in ashes, maybe to feel good about their own righteousness, or to have their neighbors notice—but apparently it's not for God. And it's not doing **them** any good. Because it's not changing their hearts, or their behavior for the better—which is supposed to be part of the point of ritual. Worship, ritual, fasting, and prayer are not supposed to be done for their own sake. They're supposed to connect us to God, and change our hearts and minds *and behavior*. But God says the people of Israel are not exhibiting this.

On the contrary, God says they're oppressing their workers, and fighting amongst themselves. This is not at all what God had in mind. Instead, God says this is what's wanted:

to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?  
...to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,

Yes, the Jews are an oppressed people in their own land, *but God is still calling them to be who they've always been called to be*: a light unto the nations. They are to help the oppressed, to feed the hungry, and to house the homeless. That is the sacrifice that God wants. Note that God doesn't say that people shouldn't fast, or engage in other acts of worship, but that this worship should result in *changing their hearts*—in making them want to help others.

Not surprisingly, Jesus calls for something very similar in the Gospel lesson for today. In this part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus uses two **metaphors** to *define* his community: salt, and light.

He says, "you are the salt of the earth," —actually in the Greek, it's "y'all"—that plural form of "you" and the emphasis is very much on the "y'all" and the present tense part of this sentence. So **y'all are** the salt of the earth. Not y'all **could be** the salt of the earth, if you do x, y and z, or y'all **SHOULD BE** the salt of the earth, but "y'all **ARE** the salt of the earth." He is very encouraging, and affirming here. But why salt? Throughout history, salt has been incredibly important; without its use as a preservative, a great deal of food would have spoiled. It was also valued as a seasoning, of course, because it enhances the flavor of things. But in Jewish culture, salt was also a *symbol of the covenant between God and God's people*, and certain sacrifices in the temple **required** salt to be on them. Also, to show that a **covenant was eternal**, they sealed it with salt. So in comparing them to a valuable and holy thing like salt, Jesus shows a very high opinion of his listeners. And if Jesus' followers already **are** the salt of the earth, then certain things are true: they represent God's eternal covenant with all creation; they can preserve things

that should be preserved. Like, they should be following the law, preserving their culture, keeping what makes them unique. If they're like salt, then they can enhance the goodness of things. They are about eliciting the good in the world. As followers of Jesus then, they are sealing God's eternal covenant with all creation. And as followers of Jesus NOW, all of those things apply to **us**, as well.

The second metaphor is light. Jesus says, "Y'all ARE the light of the world." For the disciples this probably reminded them of Isaiah's statement that God's people were to be a "light to all nations," helping those in need, and bringing about a reign of peace on earth. I think that's mostly what Jesus is about here, referring to Jerusalem, the city built on a hill that can't be hidden, and exhorting his followers to "let y'all's light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." The disciples are to do good works, *not* because they earn God's favor in some way by doing them, but because those works glorify God. Those works are a reflection of God's light. And this leads directly into the discussion of the law. Jesus makes it clear that he is not about abolishing the law. Instead, he is fulfilling it. He is the promised Messiah, and his followers live out both the letter, and the spirit of the law. Not the empty ritual for its own sake, like the scribes and Pharisees, but Jesus' wants his followers to have transformed hearts as a result of following the law—he wants them to actually walk the talk. **To actually walk the talk.**

A lot of you know that I work full-time as lead chaplain at Winchester Medical Center. In working there I meet people from all walks of life, sometimes very, very poor people. One day I was talking with a man recovering from surgery. I had prayed with him before his surgery, and had come to check up on him a couple of days later, and he was recovering well. As we talked for a while, I discovered that he was homeless, and that he would probably go to a shelter when he was discharged. His surgery and hospitalization was part of Valley Health's charitable outreach, and had been free. He was amazed that, while at the hospital, the fact that he was homeless had not seemed to matter, at all. He told me "You know, they call me "Mister" here, and I get to pick what I have to eat, and they ask me **if I have everything I need**. You know, *nobody* outside of this place ever asks me that." He became a bit tearful as he thought about this. "*Nobody* asks me that. But here they treat me like a **king**." As I think about that man, and how he was cared for in the hospital, I would say that we should *all* be asking him if he has everything he needs. As God's people today, the scriptures call to us in the same way they called to Isaiah's and Jesus' people.

We **all** are called  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?  
...to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,

I think as a parish community, Christ Church **is doing** this in many ways. But how this plays out in our individual lives is up to us as individuals, isn't it? What does it mean to YOU to loose the

bonds of injustice? When we see injustice, it's usually easier to look the other way. Fighting injustice is *very* uncomfortable. It can also be dangerous. *But we are called to do it.*

Sharing your bread with the hungry, bringing the homeless poor into your house, covering the naked—what does that look like for YOU? You can't do all of this all by yourself, but there are lots of charities to partner with here, and I imagine that you know someone personally who would benefit from your help. Again, it might not be comfortable—*But as followers of Jesus we are called to do it.*

And just as Jesus calls for his disciples to be salt and light, so he asks **us** to do it, as well. And y'all ARE salt. Y'all ARE light. **Be** who you really are.

Amen