

# Sermon: Epiphany 5

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February 5, 2017

Year A

Isaiah 58:1-9a

Psalm 112:1-9

1 Corinthians 2:1-12

Matthew 5:13-20

When we read the scriptures at home... it's my hope that we read... learn... and inwardly digest them... that they serve as food which nourishes our spiritual body... and helps form us... after all... we are what we eat... and when we listen to the scriptures here... during worship... it's my prayer that we don't just hear them... perhaps while we're thinking about the other things we need to do today... but listen... really listen to what God is saying to us... and not just listen... but are moved to embody and act on them...

But we're also post-modern enough... to understand that scripture has to be understood in context... that some things that applied to scripture's original writers and audiences... may not apply to us now... and we have to remember... that scripture has been used to support slavery... the oppression of women... the burning of witches... and the persecution of Jews... things which we reject...

For example... I don't want anyone to remain so focused on Leviticus 18:22... which says that my relationship with Joel is an abomination... that they disregard Lev. 11:10... which says that eating shellfish is detestable... or Lev. 19:19... which says we may not wear clothing made up of two or more fibers... or Lev. 19:28... which says we shall not tattoo our bodies... or Lev. 25:44... which says we are allowed to take male and female slaves from neighboring nations... But then there are vv. like Lev. 19:34... which says... the alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you... you shall love the alien as yourself... for you were aliens in the land of Egypt... and I wonder which passages we listen to more... because they are self-serving... or line up with what The Rev. Dr. Laurence Keene said: *There's nothing wrong with a fifth-grade understanding of God – as long as you're in the fifth grade.*

How we read scripture matters... we need to consider the historical context in which it was written... it's literary form... how what has come down to us... is in some ways... different from the original texts... how some words are understood differently now than they were then... and we need to affirm... that there is good news... there is Gospel... in the Jewish scriptures... and there is good news... there is Gospel... in the Christian scriptures... and we must affirm that in order for there to be good news... there must be an underlying consistency... and there's not Republican consistency... or Democratic consistency... just God's consistency... what God wants us to know... and to do...

Today's passage from Isaiah was written about 800 years before Jesus was born... it is a hard reading on which to be nourished... it contains sharp words which are difficult to chew... and considering what we're used to eating... its words may give indigestion... it shines a light on the sin of Isaiah's time... and on the sin of our time... and it contends with us... as both individuals and as a nation... to take an honest look at where we are... and where God calls us to be...

Announce to My people their rebellion... and to the nations... their sins... day after day they seek Me as if they practiced righteousness... and did not forsake My laws... they ask of Me righteous judgments... they ask... *Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why do we humble ourselves, but you do not notice?*

*Look... God says... you serve your own interests on your fast day... and oppress all your workers... Look... you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist... the kind of fasting you do will not make its way to heaven... because the kind of fast I ask of you... is to loose the bonds of injustice... undo the thongs of the yoke... let the oppressed go free... and break every yoke... it is 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 hide yourself from your own kin... then... your light shall break forth like the dawn... and your healing shall spring up quickly... and I will go before*

*you... and my Glory will follow you... then you shall call... and I will answer... then you shall cry for help... and I will say... Here I am...*

When I was about six... and my brother was about eight ... my dad would tell me to turn off the light... and I would lament... or whine... *I didn't turn it on...* and my dad would say... *it doesn't matter who turned it on... I'm asking you to turn it off...* but in my immaturity... there seemed to be some injustice in that... something unfair... it was like I was having to reap something I didn't sow... but the truth was... I had to let go of that... it really didn't matter who turned it on... in order to be good stewards of creation... it just needed to be turned off... in order to be in that family relationship... we needed to be accountable to each other... in order to be in community... we needed to help each other out... and in order to create the kinds of communities described in Isaiah... there needs to be a lot of letting go...

During my ordination process... when I was going through my three days of psychological testing... to ensure my suitability for the priesthood... I wondered... why aren't at least some of our elected leaders... at least at some level and higher... required to do the same... and even though we don't live in a theocracy... it wouldn't hurt to add in some education about our three Abrahamic faiths... some diversity training... because some of our politicians... on both sides of the aisle... are like six year olds... blaming someone else for turning the light on... but not knowing how to turn it off... are having a hard time being in community... are figuratively paying too much attention to the parts of Leviticus that don't mean much... and not paying enough attention to the parts... that are Gospel... to the parts which instruct us to loose the bonds of injustice... undo the thongs of the yoke... let the oppressed go free... and share our bread with the hungry... and it's one thing to say... *we honor and support the good news for all people... but we're not sure how to achieve them...* and it's another thing entirely... to say... *that's not good news we need to promote...* it's like thinking that Ex. 21:7 is still valid... which says it's OK to sell your daughter into slavery...

Some people confuse losing... with death... and death with losing... Jesus certainly didn't confuse the two... in his death... was his victory... today's Epistle affirms that... the consciousness that is capable of accepting death... embracing death... without experiencing it as losing... is a consciousness that is permanently established beyond time and space... is established in the ground of all Being... does not consider it to be an abstract idea... does not make a mood about it... or pretend to be connected to it... but is One with it... and lives that out... and part of why Jesus said he came to abolish the Law... is because written law can't know what's in people's hearts...

There's not much firewood in the Middle East... but there is a lot of dung... with a high level of compressed plant matter that can burn as fuel... but even this needs some help... so a block of salt is placed at the base of the oven... the salt becomes a catalyst of sorts for the fire... allowing the dung to burn hotter and more completely... but over time... the salt loses its ability to catalyze... and is often laid out like paver stones... literally becomes good for nothing and is trampled under foot... and when you consider the original languages in which scripture was written... and the cross-cultural colloquialisms... and the meanings that have come down to us... Jesus could also be saying... you are the salt of the hearth...

Late night talk show host... and Roman Catholic... Stephen Colbert... said: *If this is going to be a Christian nation that doesn't help the poor... either we have to pretend that Jesus was just as selfish as we are... or we've got to acknowledge that He commanded us to love the poor and serve the needy without condition... and then admit that we just don't want to do it...*

In her book... A Return to Love... Marianne Williamson wrote... *Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about*

*shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.*

We are the salt of the earth... Theologian John Shea wrote: our salt identity is for the benefit of the earth... our lives are a mission to bring zest and meaning to the earth... what is wasteful is to lose this ultimate purpose and passion... to forget this calling and be rendered to a shriveled identity... which cannot be savored... but is trampled underfoot... we are the light of the world... we are not meant to hide our light... or ourselves... under bushel baskets... so we must ask... why do we minimize our light... what keeps us from shining... what are our baskets... why... and for whom... do we hide under them... but let's also remember... that one candle loses nothing... when it lights another candle... so as Nadia might say... be blessed salt... and blessed light...

Mike+