A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*Seasoning and Shining*

Matthew 5.13-14

February 9, 2020

I would like us this morning to listen carefully to two descriptions Jesus says about his disciples: You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. I’d like us to consider what these two sayings say about what we do, about who we are, and ultimately about who He is.

These surely are two of the most beloved ways Jesus talks about his people. When we are called sheep to Jesus as our shepherd, that has some mixed implications. Sheep can faithfully follow their shepherd, but they can also wander off dumbly and get themselves in a lot of trouble. When we are called the branches to his vine, that is kind of mixed as well. The branches grow fruitfully from the source of their life, but they can also grow wild and need to be pruned. When we are called the body of Christ, each of us an important part complementing the whole, that’s a beautiful image, but we know how broken the body can be.

Salt and Light are different, simpler maybe, though each of them is paired also with its own warning. Light can be put under a bushel where it does not shine in the darkness like it’s supposed to shine. And salt can lose its saltiness, at least according to Jesus’ warning. It’s not clear that would actually happen since salt really can’t lose its saltiness any more than water can stop being wet. Still, it makes sense that every image for Jesus’ disciples would also have paired with it something that can go wrong.

The body can be broken.

Sheep can wander off into danger.

Branches can produce no fruit.

Light can be hidden under a basket.

And we can at least imagine how worthless salt would be if it had lost all its saltiness.

For every evocative image used to describe the people of God, there’s a warning coupled with it. There’s a good reason for that. The whole story of humanity basically follows these contour lines. You are beautifully and wonderfully made. But you can turn away from your beauty and wonder and the one who made you. This is the temptation before every person and every community in every generation. Be who you are made to be. Be who you are called to be. And you discover *that* through relationship with Jesus and in the grace he gives. You learn to be the body of Christ in which each part is important and all complement the others. You learn to be sheep who listen to the voice of your shepherd… to be branches who apart from him can do nothing, light that shines in the darkness and salt that seasons the world.

Salt and light. There are many possible ways to reflect on the meaning of these images. Salt, in particular, is used in so many ways that are both practical and metaphorical. Salt makes things taste better. You season the life of the world. Salt preserves things. You preserve the promises of God in the covenant. Salt heals wounds even if it stings. Your words of truth may sting, but they also bring healing in broken places. Mostly I think the idea here is that salt does not exist for salt’s self. You don’t salt salt. You salt *other* things to make them better versions of themselves in taste, quality, purity, longevity. That’s not a bad image of Christian witness, at its best. Christian saltiness so to speak is not for itself but for the good of the world.

Light works the same way. Light is not for itself either. Light is for the darkness. In the place of suffocating gloom, the smallest light dispels the darkness. It’s no wonder this is a favorite image of spiritual writers and of biblical writers. The smallest flicker of light, the dimmest bulb pushes back darkness. The psalmist says of God, “The darkness is not dark to you.” No, of course not. Darkness is not dark to the one who is pure light. Any light we have within us, any that we shine with is a reflection of God’s true light. Jesus is the Light of the World. If we are the light of the world it is as reflection of his divine light. Let us shine with God’s light. Let us season, purify, and heal as God’s salt.

This also says something about who we are as much as what we do. And anything it says about us is an echo of what it says about Jesus. Everything said in the Sermon on the Mount is cannot be de-coupled from the one who is saying it. We have life in the one who fulfills the law the prophets and even this sermon itself. So, what does it say about who we are? The key is in the overlooked words in the phrases, earth and world.

You are the salt of the earth. The word earth may literally be translated land, dirt, or soil. Up to this point in Matthew’s gospel, it’s been used 4 times, every time translated to mean a particular place: the land of Judah, the land of Zebulun, the land of Israel. I don’t think we have to retranslate our verse as you are the salt of the land or salt of the soil to be drawn into the meaning here. The main point is that salt comes from below, whether from water or mined from land. It’s from below our feet. As a common, beloved, important symbol of all that is from below, salt takes on a meaning beyond its tasty uses at the dinner table. Salt is a symbol of God’s covenant with the people and the land. In Numbers, the promises between God and the people is called a Covenant of Salt. And in Leviticus, we hear the command to add a salt to every sacrifice that is offered to God. Salt becomes symbolic of everything that is of the earth offered up to God in praise and sacrifice. To be salt of the earth is to remember where we come from: you profoundly belong the land God has put under your feet. Genesis 2 tells that story, God forming humans from the very clay of the ground, *Adam* from the *adamah*. You are salt of the earth reminds us of all of this: we are creatures in covenant with God who drew us up from the ground, made to be living sacrifices for God’s praise and glory. Salt of the earth is an image that comes up from below.

You are the light of the world comes from a different direction. The word world in Greek is cosmos, which is a word which evokes something very different than land, dirt, or soil.

It means the big picture, sun and stars, the universe, the mystery. *Cosmos* takes our eyes to distant horizons, up to the heavens. It’s a big picture word. In the wilderness temptations, Satan takes Jesus up to the top of the mountain and shows him the kingdoms of the world, the cosmos, and the glory of them and offers them to Jesus, as if Jesus weren’t already the King of Kings. To be light of the world is to somehow be part of this light that’s bigger than you are; whether it’s the sun’s light which we receive and mirror, or divine light which lives in us and yet is beyond us. Genesis 1 tells the creation story in which God commands light to be, and it is. In Genesis 1, all that is created is created by divine will and divine word. Light, water, trees, animals, and people. When God says let there be… then there is. Though we are not God, we alone among God’s creatures are made in God’s image. You are the light of the world reminds us of this, our identity as creatures brought to being by God’s will and God’s Word as God’s image.

So, in these two pictures, we begin to see layers of meaning that go all the way down through us. It’s not just about what we might do for God or how we might act in the world. It’s about who we are created to be, of the earth and of the divine word.

And then we remember that it’s not just about us. Because the exemplar of being of the earth and of the divine isn’t us, though made in the image of God. The exemplar of being of the earth and of God is Christ himself, God in the flesh incarnate, fully God and fully man, his two natures divine and human joined together in union without confusion, without change, without division, without separation. We may be salt of the earth; he is the fullness of earth and the heart of Creation. We may be light of the world; he is true light of true light. What he says of us here, as high and holy as it is, is a distant echo of who he is. He fulfills the law and the prophets and the Sermon on the Mount and all humanity and all divinity. He is.

And what is more, besides the encouragement given to them, and to us, what the disciples don’t know yet, can’t know yet, is the prophetic fullness of what Jesus is saying to them. For in time, he will be thrown out and trampled upon by men, and he will be put behind a stone in a dark tomb. But the good news is still: the Light of God cannot be extinguished and the Son of God and Son of Man cannot be silenced, stopped, or defeated, even in rejection, crucifixion, or death. The tomb is empty, the light shines on, and the Lord lives. If Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can we keep from singing his praise, and walking in his ways.

If you fear you will be trampled as my disciples like worthless salt, you may be. Sometimes the path you’ll take is dangerous, sometimes it’s lonely, sometimes it’s hard. Season the earth anyway-- everywhere your foot hits the ground. The earth needs you. If you think the light of faith in you may be plunged in deep darkness, it may. The world can be a dark place. Shine anyway. The world’s deepest darkness isn’t enough to overcome the light shining in you.

You are who you are because of who he is: the good shepherd, the true vine, the firstborn of all creation, and the image of the invisible God, and now, as we turn toward those other signs of Christ: the bread and the cup, we remember he is also Emmanuel, God with us. Amen.

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