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February 8, Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
Saint Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

You ALL Are the Light

Matthew 5:13-20

[Jesus said,] “You are the salt of the earth, 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 under foot.

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it 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.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. 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. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Were it the Colts playing in this evening’s Super Bowl, we’d be treated to sweeping views of Indianapolis. We’d see Lucas Oil Stadium, and, of course, the carefully lit views of the Soldiers and Sailors monument—the Circle—and the Ziggurat-pyramid-topped World War I memorial, probably lit up in blue and white. Those lights are now LEDs, I’m sure, the colors changed by computer program. But before that, they were gel filters, changed carefully by groundskeepers. My dad worked on these buildings for most of his career, and I have a particularly found memory of the dedication of the first color-changeable lights on the World War I Memorial. It is a silly thing, I suppose, but my dad got to speak—and we got to see it replayed that night on the 11 o’clock news. He pointed out that we light what we honor, we light what we value. With the proliferation of LED lights, it is cheaper and easier to light anything and everything, and yet lighting is much a more complex issue than it ever was. It costs us next to nothing to leave a porch light on all night, but it is becoming increasingly known that light pollution is likely costing us more than we imagine in terms of habitat loss for nocturnal creatures and in terms of well-being for humans who, too, need natural darkness—oddly, our own kind of habitat loss. This complicated relationship with actual light extends, I think, to metaphorical light. Light isn’t threatened just by darkness but by those who, like Pilate in John’s gospel asking “What is truth?”...the light is threatened by those who claim the light is not actually light at all. But Jesus doesn’t say, “You ought to get out there and light lights,” and Jesus doesn’t say, “You

are the only light there is," or Jesus doesn't even say, "Don't let your light go out." Jesus says, "You *are* the light of the world."

The images that Jesus offers today, early images in the Sermon on the Mount, are not actually new images. They are images—old images—for Israel: the nation, the people—the people of God. But, in this time, Israel is occupied by Rome. Whatever it means to be Israel has become tied up in being part of a massive empire; it has become tied up in having the best of your country boxed up, shipped to the powerful and wealthy who tax, tariff, and toll the treasures of your land. Whatever it means to be Israel has become tied up in the rebuilt Temple, which was repaired and expanded by Herod the Great, an agent of Rome, and a person who claimed Judaism to his political advantage, while he was certainly ready to ignore, if not abolish, the Law—the Torah—and the Prophets.

I'm not sure much has changed in 2000 years. The image of being a Jesus-follower has gotten tangled up in nationalism that believes political authority and religious authority are the same thing, silencing all critical voices. What it means to be a Jesus-follower has gotten tangled up in a legalistic mindset that assumes being a Christian means enforcing your neighbor's faithfulness *within* systems of oppression and injustice rather than freeing them from systems that make faithfulness impossible. Being a Jesus-follower has gotten tangled up in hierarchies that demand submission even when those hierarchies have proven time and time again that they exist to protect their own interests.

When Jesus says to people of the Judean countryside, you are the salt, you are the light, he is giving back to the people their own understanding of themselves as God's beloved people. The image isn't of a conquering nation that ultimately defeats its foes. It is an image of a people who understand themselves as blessed to be a blessing, as a holy people charged with cultivating the holiness and goodness of the world God made. It is an image of a people who are like a seasoning that flavors not just a bite, but a whole dish; a light that illumines not just the corner where it is placed, but the whole house; a city whose promised safety and flourishing, isn't just for its citizens, but for all who seek refuge there. The image is of a *people*. It is, "Ya'll are the light of the world." You are not alone in this. You're not meant to be some lone candle on a hilltop, threatened by every breeze. You are one in a sea of lights.

Light is a central image of hope in many cultures, and not just light but *growing* light: it is the central image in Diwali, Advent, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa—in each of these holidays the light grows the way only light can: when it is divided, it multiplies. I think, too, of a central image of our church, not just any candle, but the paschal candle—the one by the baptismal font. Oil candles are a gift to the altar guild: most of the time, there's no wax to clean up, less soot. But when all the candles were hand-dipped wax, the paschal candle was formed each year of all the little nubs of candles leftover from the year's worship, a coming together of light, in a way. A reminder that you *all* are the light of the world.

So many of us are frightened right now. We are frightened that what we have seen in Minneapolis might spread to our community, that our neighbors might be harmed, that we might be called upon to stand in the breach. While we might want to blame some “growing darkness” as the source of our fear, I can’t help but think that we are possibly more afraid of our light going out.

Pr. Martin Niemöller is best known for his poem that begins, “First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist.” Pr. Neimöller’s congregation was part of the Confessing Church in Germany and many of its members were a part of the Resistance. One Sunday, they read out of the names of several church members who had been arrested or who were missing. They didn’t know it, but Pr. Neimöller was, himself, about to be arrested. In his sermon, Pr. Neimöller said, “When I read out the names, a little while ago, did we not think: ‘Alas and alack, will this wind, this storm, that is going through the world just now, not blow out the Gospel candle? We must therefore take the message in out of the storm and put it in a safe nook.’” But he reminded the people that Jesus said not to do that, not to hide the light: he said, “We are not to worry whether the light is extinguished or not; that is [God’s] concern: we are only to see that the light is not hidden away—hidden away perhaps with a noble intent, so that we may bring it out again in calmer times—no: ‘Let your light shine before [others]!’” Beloved, it is not up to us to light the light, to be alone as the light, nor to protect the light. All that is up to us is to shine the light, and give glory to God in heaven.

Amen.