

## **Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time: February 5, 2017**

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### **“YOU ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD”**

“I want to walk as a child of the light. I want to follow Jesus.” The words of this hymn by Kathleen Thomerson reflect the simple truth at the heart of our faith: we desire to follow Jesus. We want to walk in his way and what better image is there than that of light?

In the ancient world, before electricity and before the use of natural gas, light was supplied by fire, and fire came from lighting wood or oils or animal fat. After sunset, the world was indeed dark. No city lights or well-lit homes, only simple fires and clay lamps or lanterns. It is little wonder that when the Hebrews told their creation stories, the world was described as “darkness over the abyss” and the first creative act of God was the invention of light (Gen 1:1-3).

Only with light could the waters and land and animals and plants be identified and named. Light allows the eye to take in shape and color and size and to make sense of our surroundings. But light is more than a detection device. Light is used to lead the way out of darkness.

Those released from slavery in Egypt found themselves in the Sinai desert wandering and afraid. Shaped by the experience of the darkness of forced labor and the tyranny of pharaoh, God’s people left Egypt without knowing the way. In the desert they trusted *and* they doubted, they rejoiced *and* grumbled and cried out. And God led them with light – a pillar of fire by day and a cloud by night. These pillars became symbolic of the desire of God to lead them not just to a new land, but to a new experience of life that would shape them into God’s own people.

God would call upon Israel to reflect the divine light; to become a “light for the nations” (Isa 42:6; 49:6), not because Israel was perfect, but because even in imperfection, God’s people could become an avenue of salvation for others. Jesus was steeped in

this tradition that experienced God as light. He knew his ancestral stories, he prayed the psalms and he studied the sacred scrolls we know as the Old Testament. In the Gospel of John (8:12) Jesus describes himself as the “light of the world.”

When Jesus preached and taught and healed and shared meals with those around him he showed himself to be the face of God. He was light in the darkness of their illnesses or despair or sinfulness. His light identified the contours of hypocrisy and named the sin, not to punish, but to redeem. His light identified the shape of sorrow and loneliness so that those on the fringes could be restored to community. His light identified the symptoms of disease so that healing could be delivered to body and soul.

Jesus, the light of the world, did not simply identify the signs around him. He lit a path on which to walk that would lead people to fully experience God’s light life. He invited people to become a reflection of the very light that he possesses. In our Gospel today, Jesus charged them, and us, in fact, to BE the light of the world! “Your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father.”

Surely Jesus had in mind what Isaiah had proclaimed centuries before: to share bread with the hungry, to shelter the oppressed and the homeless, to clothe the naked, to take care of others. In our first reading this Sunday, Isaiah reminded Israel that in these works of mercy, healing would come and light would rise before them in the darkness. These same works of mercy will appear and be expanded toward the end of Matthew’s gospel where one’s care for those most in need or one’s neglect of them will reveal how we have responded to God in our midst. Being the light of the world comes with responsibilities that are borne of love and compassion.

In today’s Gospel from Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount, Jesus uses images from daily life to remind his followers that they have a God-given identity and a God-given mission. They are to be a robust presence in the world--salt that enhances flavor and preserves what is good, salt that can even be used for cooking fire and can purify what is burned in sacrifice. They are to be a city set on a mountain, perhaps calling to mind the city of Jerusalem set high in the Judean Mountains for all to see. They are to be light! We are to be light!

Jesus’ emphasis is not just on claiming our identity, as important as that is, but on mission. Individually we are charged with the mission of reflecting God’s glory, but in this gospel passage the “you” is a corporate “you.” The “you” is the church, the people

of God. The church is to shine for all to see. Our mission is not preservation or maintenance as if we are primarily responsible for the survival of our institution. Our mission has a purpose beyond the walls of our churches and the circles of our faith sharing groups.

Our mission is to bring others into the light and to share the glory of God. Good deeds for others are simply the expression of our relationship which lights us from within. They reflect, too, a desire to draw others into this experience of God that we have been given, and to see in others the very image of God in which they were created..

Will we be perfect reflections of God's light in our world? Of course not. Israel was imperfect, the apostles and leaders of the early church were imperfect, as are we. But God's Word encourages us to embrace this high calling nonetheless. This is the nature of grace – that in the midst of flaws God will work. We have only to look around and see it happening. Exhausted parents still love their children and find time to mend a broken heart, nurses who are overextended still come with compassion to the bedside of a patient, factory workers who wonder if their labor is valuable still give their best to the product on their line, managers who worry over personnel issues still do their best to provide training and encouragement, doctors who work long hours still greet their patients with the desire to address their concerns.

We individuals who want to follow Jesus trace a path that is lit by the faith-filled trust and commitment of the generations who have gone before us and the many who surround us. This is the nature of being church together. It is in community that we hear our call and find the courage to respond. It is in community that we discover the light that shines through us, most especially in the cracks left behind by our failed attempts to be the light on our own.