

5 Epiphany A 2017

Isaiah 58:1- 9a

Psalm 112:1-6

1 Corinthians 2:1-12

Matthew 5:13-20

What is your relationship to the news these days?

Some of us can't look away.
We check and check and check,
All day long and way too far into the night.

What are we looking for?
Confirmation?
Affirmation?
A chance to sink even deeper?

Others of us
Just can't look.
We know we're putting our heads in the sand,
And we've chosen to do it
In order to preserve some semblance of sanity and self respect.

It's a marathon, not a sprint, we say.
Take Facebook off your phone.
Take a hike.
Or, in the immortal words
Of a recent children's bedtime book for parents,
"Go the %\$*&#\$\$%^# to Sleep!"

I couldn't look away for a while.
I was learning what it felt like to be an addict.
It was beginning to damage my health and my relationships.

So, earlier this week,
I took a fast from the news.
Well, a partial fast.
And it helped.
I got my prayer life back.
I remembered that there were muscles in my face
That produced a smile.

Then I went back to the newspaper.
And the day I returned to the news,

There were the same images and words and positions –
To my left and to my right –
That had driven me away.

Except for one thing.
One image of beauty and terror
Unlike anything I had ever seen.
Maybe you saw it too.

A bright, deep glowing red ribbon of fire
Plunging into a foaming white sea,
Under a beautiful blue sky.
The volcano in Hawaii
That had formed a “firehose” –
Now collapsed –
And sent it plunging over a cliff
Into the sea.



A river of fire.
The sea boils.
The fire puts the water out.
Splendid and terrible,
And it stopped me in my tracks,
Widened my gaze,

And shook me out of my sour caustic judgmental gloom.

It turned my world,
If not upside down,
A little sideways.

Just the way Jesus does.
In good times,
And hard times,
And times like nothing we have seen before.

We are always trying to forget
That Jesus is a radical shaker of the status quo,
A bringer of uncomfortable comfort
And disturbing joy.

So when he says to those who follow him,
You are the salt of the earth,
And the light of the world,
Let's not be too quick to think
He is talking about pleasantly seasoned comfort foods
And lamplight on a quiet evening.

He's talking about the preserving, purifying agent
That makes life possible,
And the unseen beginning
Of all that is.
Let there be light, after all,
Is the way our story begins.

Depending on where you are,
And what you think,
The world has either turned sideways,
Or straightened up,
Or turned upside down.

The light comes from a river of fire.
The salt of the sea
Goes up in steam.
Where does it go?
Is it still salt?
Can we see by the light of the fire?

No matter how you regard the events of the moment,
There's no mistaking the intensity and the change.

That means that we are hearing scripture
In a context that is utterly new.
And that means
The words are not the same.

The promise is still the promise.
The good news is still good news.

But we hear the words
With new eyes
And read them with new ears.

You are the salt of the earth.
You are the light of the world.
Let your light shine,
So that what you do
Will show that God is still among us.

How will we do that?
In the same old ways.

We do these things
That give life its savor,
And shine a light on what is:

Scripture, prayer,
Worship,
And the works of justice.

We return, again and again,
To the weird and wonderful words
Of the storytellers, the prophets,
The poets, and the heralds of the good news.
The words that sound different
In new, beautiful and terrible times.
Words that sound different
And carry the same truth.

God is here,
God is faithful,
God is love.

We pray, over and over,
Maintaining a golden thread of connection
To the one who is beyond our knowing,
Above the fray,

More than we can encompass,
And yet –
Here, faithful,
Willing to be with us.

We worship,
Gathering, singing,
Remembering,
Asking and offering
What is free and priceless,
The gifts of God
For the people of God.

And we hold fast the promise and the hope
That what we have received and enjoyed
Is for everyone.

Sharing the gifts of life
Is hard work.
Proclaiming and enacting
A trust in abundance
In a world of scarcity
Means sharing when we want to cling,
Offering when we want to hoard.

Proclaiming and enacting
The equality and dignity of every living thing
In a world of us and them,
Of high and low,
Is risky.

Proclaiming and enacting
The truth of love
Is beyond us.
Loving our neighbor as our own self
Asks of us everything we have,
And more.

We cannot do any of this
If we think our saltiness comes from ourselves
Rather than the elemental source of life.
We cannot shine a light
If we think
We brought the light to light.

Without the essence of life,

Our salt would lose its salt.
Without the light that made the world,
We would have no light to share.

Jesus, the very one
Who turned us upside down and inside out
And asked us to do
What we could never do,
Offers us a way around
And through and beyond,
If only we can follow.

These times are beyond us.
There are things we must do,
And yet we cannot,
Unless we look beyond ourselves
To that which is beyond our knowing,
And yet is here,
Giving savor like salt,
Awareness like light.

Imagine food without salt.
Life without light.

Our bodies need salt.
Our minds hunger for light.

And just as our bodies crave salt
And our minds look for light,
Our hearts and souls
Reach out in longing
For that vastness,
That spark
That we cannot name.

That which will give us everything we need
To face what we never hoped to see.

That which will bring us our heart's desire
Even when it seems
All our hopes are gone.

What is it that our souls desire?
The more, one writer called it.¹
The one who is known as "beyondness,"
As many others have said.

Being itself, says scripture.ⁱⁱ

This being is the source of our lives,
And yet is invisible,
Intangible,
Unknown.
As salt when used well disappears into the food
As light is unseen but allows us to see,
So this being
Makes our lives worth living,
And yet can be so suffused into life
That we are unaware
That “the more” is there,
That “beyondness” is here.

Perhaps we can only know
How this being, this is-ness
Shapes our lives
When we realize
What a difference salt makes,
When we remember what it feels like
When the light returns.

That savor that salt gives,
That life that light gives,
That’s what it’s like to live
In the presence of the one who is.

When we live in that presence,
The presence lives in us.
And then we are the ones
Who bring the beyond
Into here and now.

You are the salt of the earth.
You are the light of the world.

The awesome truth is this:

We do more than savor the salt.
We do more than bask in the light.
We pass it on.

God is inviting us
To be the ones
Who turn a fainting life

And a dark world
Into the new dawn of justice
The prophets promise.

Imagine a world without salt and light.
Imagine a world without us,
God's partners in bringing
A priceless gift
That rights all wrongs and
makes all things new.

ⁱ William James

ⁱⁱ Tillich's phrase has its roots in the divine self revelation in Exodus 3:14