

Upstairs and Down *Matthew 5:13-16; Isaiah 58:1-12*

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“You are the salt of the earth....You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.” Matthew 5:13-14

Many Friday evenings ago, when I was a much younger pastor, the phone rang in our home. It was a man named Brian. I’d never met him, had no idea how he got our number. We had some company over as I recall and were enjoying laughter and a rather carefree beginning to the weekend. I could tell right away it was one of *those* phone calls. Brian was a stranger in town—no money, no place to stay, a broken-down car that needed a ball joint. Could I help him?

I must admit as I drove to meet him that my thoughts were not benevolent and filled with light. In fact, I wondered the worst about this person. How’d he get *my* number? What was he doing here when he lived in Ohio? I was inwardly annoyed, and you are my confessors.

There he was, standing in front of a Texaco station, expectantly watching for my car. He was dressed in a jacket that actually had a plastic crucifix of Jesus sewn onto the back. He was beaming. I wanted to pretend I was someone else and drive the other way. We chatted and inspected his car. It too had a plastic crucifix, a rather large one, lashed to the trunk with rope. This had all the makings of a long evening.

As we drove to the homeless shelter, Brian chatted excitedly about his faith. He was on fire with it and knew the Bible well. I lay low. He said, “You know, I’ve got this great video about Jesus back at the car, and if you let me sleep on your floor tonight, we could watch it together.”

Time froze for a second, and all of these biblical images flashed in front of the headlights. I thought of old Isaiah who urges God’s people to “bring the homeless poor *into your house*...and not to hide yourself from *your own kin*.” I thought of Brian on our living room floor in a sleeping bag, and I thought of psychopaths and ax murderers, and even though Isaiah mentions nothing about taking the homeless to a shelter instead, I decided to biblically paraphrase on the spot and lie a little. I said: “I’m not sure what my wife would think of that.” Yes, blame the woman. *She* wouldn’t understand. Her misgivings, not mine. He accepted my little lie. We arrived at the shelter. I said goodnight and went back to our home, our friends, dessert.

You see how this works? Jesus says, “You are the light of the world.” And so we are. On one level we acknowledge this. We gather here to pray and sing and stand up for Jesus. We belt out “This Little Light of Mine” with fervent gusto. But the truth is that it’s easier to hide from the daily nature of such a faith. Admit it. Jesus is just plain tiring at times. We are sometimes annoyed and a bit put out with the people he sends us. We just want to be left alone. We come here week after week and drop our dollars in the offering plate and say all the right words. Isn’t that enough?

Isaiah 58 describes Israel just after they’ve returned from the Babylonian Exile. They are rebuilding a ransacked Jerusalem, and they are careful to jump through all

the proper religious hoops this time around. They want God on their side in case of future aggression. So they worship and pray regularly; they even fast, commendably. But it doesn't seem to "work." Problems and violence are all around them. The people get kind of uppity with God: "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Humble ourselves, but you don't seem to notice?" They say this to God! It's the old question: "Why are bad things happening to us very good people?"

Speaking for God, Isaiah answers. "You call *this* a fast?" Uh-oh. "Is not this the fast I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free?" Worship without justice and mercy is not faith, says Isaiah; it's an escape. You cannot hide in the sanctuary and close your eyes to the world.

The irony of Isaiah's words here is that Israel's history is told from the angle of an oppressed people who were liberated at the Red Sea. Israel should *know* what to be about because they had been in the place of the people they were ignoring. But God popped them loose from Pharaoh's brickyard, brought them safely through the sea, and set them free. "How can you turn your back on your own kin?" asks the prophet. "These naked and hungry and homeless ones are a lot like you were." Rescued by God's light, Israel was expected to *be light* for others.

Christians have their own paradigm for this Red Sea event. It's called baptism. We are led through the waters from death to life, from darkness to light. We are set free for good works. It's not just a sweet gesture when we place a candle in the hands of the newly baptized and say, "Let your light so shine before others, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." Jesus once said, "I am the light of the world." In baptism, he now says we are. You are light. You are salt. I think it's instructive that Jesus never says, "You are sugar." The word never even appears in the Bible. But sometimes we equate being a Christian with being nice and sweet and well-mannered.

You are light. You bring illumination to dark places. You are salt. You bring seasoning and a bit of feistiness to complacency. And Jesus never says, "You *oughta* be light and salt," reprimanding us. That's a common mistake of preachers like me, by the way. Jesus says, "You are."

I met Brian the next morning outside the auto parts store. We had agreed to meet there. "Ten sharp," I'd reminded him as we said goodnight at the shelter. I halfway expected him not to show up the next morning. But there he was, smiling and wearing the plastic crucifix jacket. We bought a ball joint with money from the church discretionary fund. I dropped him off at his car. Jesus was still lashed to the trunk. We talked a bit. He thanked me. We shook hands and said goodbye. He said something as I walked away that's haunted me ever since. "See you upstairs someday, Pastor." What? I hadn't heard him. "See you upstairs," he said again. That's true, you know. The Bible tells us that God is preparing a great feast for us where the last are first and the greatest are the least. I suspect I will see Brian again upstairs someday, maybe still wearing the jacket.

But there's another side of the Bible we miss sometimes. It's about *downstairs*: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven." The kingdom of heaven is not just something we go to. Jesus says it is coming in this direction, to us: we who have been led through the Red Sea waters, now God's light for a darkened world.

Fear not. Let it shine. Upstairs and down.