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Squamish United Church

February 6, 2011

Scripture Readings:

Isaiah 58:1-9a

Matthew 5:13-19

### **Salt and Light**

One of my favorite quotes attributed to Confucius is: “It is better to light one small candle than to curse the darkness.” I do my best to live in the light rather than focus on the darkness. I don’t always get it right but I try. I know I don’t have to tell you that the reality is there is a lot to focus on and complain about in our world. Our world is filled with evil, confusion, suffering and Darkness.

Just this week my heart has been heavy as I have watched news casts of Egypt. I was there only a couple years ago. I recognize places and I am saddened even more as I see people in prayer knowing how faithful many are, but desperation drives us in ways we can’t imagine. The devastation struck me a little more personally when I noticed that my friend living in Egypt has disappeared from his normal daily face book appearances in the last couple of weeks.

I have also felt despair as I have thought of those in Australia, Haiti and other places that are or have recently experienced extreme natural disasters. I partly despair because it is these things that people often ask me about as a person of faith. “How can God do this?” people will ask.

And perhaps I frustrate and fail to comfort people when even I as the minister don’t have pat precise answers to tragedy.

You see, All I know is that I personally don’t believe God does bring these things on to destroy or curse people. I believe disasters as I have come to understand them are most often caused by human error as we fail to care for one another and our earth. I also believe God has set the universe in a constant state of creation, evolution and transformation and at times disasters are the results of the universe at work. I have not been able to understand it in any other way.

But I feel I have glimpsed some truth to how we might respond. Today’s scriptures suggest that we do something about the darkness, rather than just despair and/or talk about it. No matter how small the candle we light, no matter how insignificant our positive action, it can have an effect that can bring and preserve life.

Listen to how Eugene Peterson translates today’s gospel.

**13**"Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You've lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage.

**14-16**"Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God...Completing God's Law.

What struck me the most as I read the scriptures this week was Jesus does not say be the salt and light he says "You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world." That is a pretty significant statement. Do we even begin realize what a dramatic statement that is? Yes, we light candles. We do things. We make a difference. But we also *are* the light. We *are* the children of God. We *are* the difference.

"Consider this part two to last week's *sermon* on the Beatitudes. We're in the second of five weeks of passages from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount as recounted by Matthew. And we are again faced with the temptation to hear Jesus' words as requirement rather than blessing, as command rather than commissioning.

But Jesus doesn't say, "If you want to become salt and light, do this...." Or, "before I'll call you salt and light, I'll need to see this from you...." No, he says "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." It is, as with last week's Beatitudes, sheer blessing, commendation, affirmation, and commissioning.

David Lose wrote "Jesus goes on to say that salt that has lost its saltiness is useless and that light wasn't made to be put under a bushel, which might imply for some that there is, indeed, a threat hiding amid this pronouncement. But I wonder. Can salt really lose its saltiness? Doesn't it just dissolve? And are candles ever put under bushel baskets? Wouldn't that snuff the flame or, worse, start a fire? Maybe Jesus is implying that one can lose one's status as salt and light. Or maybe he's just naming the absurdity of the possibility of losing one's character as salt and light in order to underscore the reliability and resilience of the gift he bequeaths. "You are the salt of the earth! You are the light of the world. That's the way it is and that's the way it will stay. Period."<sup>1</sup>

Lose goes onto reflect on how we know that statistically we become what we are named or called. I was talking with a friend this week who discovered through a hypnotherapy appointment for something entirely different that she was still deeply damaged by a sixth grade teacher who told her she had rocks for brains. She was shocked. I Know I can tell you that anytime I am attempting to learn a new language I hear my elementary school French teacher tell

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<sup>1</sup> Lose, David workingpreacher.org fifth Sunday after Epiphany A

me I don't have the brains to learn as she kicked me out of the classroom for pronouncing a word wrong. That teacher and I have a few incidents I can recall like they were yesterday. She had such an influence that the memory caused me to break out into a sweat as I did my oral Hebrew exam even though I was 30 years old.

We know, "Call a child bad long enough, and he or she will believe you and act bad. Call a child (or teen or adult for that matter) worthless or unlovable or shameful, and eventually he or she – all of us! – will live into the name we've been assigned. In the same way, call us good or useful, dependable, helpful, or worthwhile, and we will grow into that identity and behavior as well."<sup>2</sup>

So let me remind you as we discovered last week "you are blessed." And not only are you blessed as a child of God but you are Salt and Light for this world. Now I realize that you may "have a hard time believing that we are good, worthy, and lovable and therefore will perhaps nod politely when you" are called salt and light but not really believe it. After all "We know ourselves too well" and you likely believe I'm paid to say these kind of nice things to you. So I thought it would be good on this day of the AGM to remind you of how you are Salt and Light.

You are salt when you pray for one another, when you send meals the way of people who are ill or struggling. You are light when you put together packages for Community Christmas Care, or give someone who needs a hug a prayer shawl. You are salt and light as you or work on the facilities development committee helping us discover how we will shine and preserve the future.

You are salt and light as you write cards or send flowers through caring ministry, or plan fun and fellowship for us all to enjoy. You remind us how to be the light as you remind of us mission and service, or pull together a mens breakfast. You are salt as you assist with fundraising to keep Squamish United Church alive. You are light as you plan and participate in worship services and even as you balance the books.

If you are salt and light in this place in so many ways imagine how much life you offer beyond these walls. I am going to invite (or perhaps I would rather request that) you to do something with and for me this week. I would like you to write me a note, or an email, or even a face book comment or a blog post this week about how you have been salt and light in this world. If it is hard to start there tell me how someone else in our church community has been salt and/or light for you. God has called you blessed. You have been called the salt of the earth and the light of life. I want you to own your identity this week. Owning our identity in Christ brings us abundance of life.

I know this is going to be difficult for many of you and I imagine most of you are thinking I am asking this and others will do it. But firstly, I want us to start looking for God in our world in an intentional, tangible way. And secondly I want us to come to believe that we are vessels through which God is working. It is my hope and prayer that as we begin to own our identity as God's

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid

beloved salt and light in in the world we will gain the confidence to live out who God is truly creating us to be.

And if it is true that we are the salt and light not just through our acts but through our very being and character we will not be able to help but bring life and light to others.

With God we will help others notice both the beauty and the need around them, we encourage the world to observe the spectacular and the grimy, and we will remind them all that they, too, are salt and light, with the gift of themselves that should be shared and not hidden.

You are the salt of the earth, You are the light of life