

Squamish United Church  
Rev. Karen Millard  
Epiphany 5

February 9, 2020

### Scripture

Isaiah 58:1-12

Matthew 5:13-20

### **You are Light**

The theme of being a light bearer seems to be drawing me these days.

In many ancient traditions chapels and places of worship set up on a hill. Some traditions did this because they felt that this brought them closer to God. Others because many stories of faith happen on a hill or a mountain. Others because of the view and still others because a city on top of a hill can not be hid. The place of worship at the highest place made sense. God oversees the city and the people and it is a place of sanctuary a shelter of safety. I even found myself in a chapel on a hill earlier this week.

Whatever the reason places of worship were set at the highest point in the village, before there were street lamps people would carry their lanterns like we would if we were camping and carrying a flashlight. Worshipers would journey up the hill carrying their light. Often the path was steep and in some ancient traditions winding with a chapel set on top like a nautilus shell. "Sacred Geometry would describe this shape as the basic building block of the universe. The ancient science explores and explains the physical and energy patterns that create and unify all things and reveals the way that the universe of creation organizes itself. Every natural pattern of growth or movement conforms inevitably to one or more geometric shapes. From the molecules of our DNA to the galaxy we spiral within, life and it's forms emerge out of geometric codes." So, I invite you to imagine with me what it might look like to journey towards a worship place that is set on a hill created to be a centre of unifying strength with all the universe. People journey to evening worship winding up a path carrying their lantern. As they enter the worship space they hang their lantern on a hook on the wall and because the chapel is in the shape of centre of the shell eventually the light surrounds them and the image of each persons light supporting the others fills the place with warmth and light. As they sit together in community they are embraced but the light and then once their prayers have been said and their worship is over each individual will gather their light and carry it back down the hill into the village, into their homes and into the world.

What does it mean for us to be bearers of light? What does it mean for us to be the light of the world? The good news translation of this scripture says "You are like light for the whole world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bowl; instead it is put on the lampstand, where it gives light for everyone in the house." When I read the scripture in that context I imagined someone taking a beautiful ceramic bowl (mine would be blues and greys because I like those colours) and what if I were to take that beautiful bowl and extinguish the

light. Even though it is something beautiful it would still create darkness. And so God says instead put the light onto a lampstand. Don't hide under anything no matter how good or right it might be it is up to us to shine the light.

Maybe that is way too much imagery for a few paragraphs of a sermon but there is something profound speaking to me lately about bearing light in the hard dark places. As I and we as a congregation have been on a path of discernment lately there have been some deep conversations about mission and service both personal and as a congregation. I have found myself wondering how to be light a lot and what exactly that means.

There is a new facebook group here in Squamish it is called "Women of Squamish" It's a "private group" that began a couple weeks ago that now has 2,735. The whole idea is to connect people (women) and be respectful of one another no matter who you are or where you are at. It is clearly set up to push out some who are on other pages that are not respectful of one another but in the reality of human relationship to tell people not to judge is impossible. Still, hundreds if not a thousand women have come on and done introductions. Some people have gotten really very personal and intimate in their intro. People have spoken about their anxieties, their depression, their relationship horror stories and their business and their growth and how they have become a goddess. It has made some excited and others nervous. Of course although there is to be no judgment - there is and some have been offended already and so some posts have come up speaking about how we should treat one another and some have mentioned they have felt judged and then everyone spouts back don't feel judged. A post came up a week or so ago that said "Reminder: someone else's opinion of you doesn't determine your worth.

You do not have to be liked by everyone, in fact, you aren't supposed to be! Don't let your light go dim because you believe you are too much for someone. Keep being joyful, keep honouring your boundaries, keep your vision clear about who you are and what truly matters. You won't be everyone's cup of tea, and thank goodness for that..quality over quantity when it comes to your tribe 🙌 .

- Reina Starke, Goddess Empowerment

It is a good quote and an excellent sentiment and it sparked a lot of interest and conversation. And there were several who came on and said things like "I don't care what others think of me." And important empowering things about how they know the way to enlightenment and how right they are. I thought to myself - I just don't get that. Granted that might be about my personality type but whenever I hear those words I hear judgement of a different kind. How does not caring about what anyone else thinks or does make you a better, stronger, healthier, happier person? I found myself replying I care deeply about what others think. It might be one of my greatest pains. People might think when they put me down that I don't even hear it but it goes deep. If you have ever had a desire to make me feel small you likely have succeeded. And yet even though I know there are others that don't like me or criticize me on any given day, how I work with that is to not let it dim my light. Just because others want to put a bowl over my light it is up to me to put my light on the lamp stand so that others can experience the glow and come into the

light too. Or more accurately I am going to go to the source of my light and let the holy help me shine. Why?

Listen to Eugene Peterson's translation of this part of the text.

“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, this generous Father in heaven.

I am really wrestling with this text and the more I wrestle the more enlightened I become (pun intended). I sat in a room discussing this, this week. In a small chapel on a hill and the profound light that came out of our conversation will likely be forever in my soul. A group of people sitting in a circle re-discovering that they indeed are light because they are beloved children of God.

As I read commentaries two of my favourite theologians expressed a very important point that I am still trying to wrap my head around.

David Lose says

“It’s a promise, not a command. Jesus isn’t saying, “You should be the salt of the earth and light of the world.” Or, “You have to be,…” let alone “You better be,…” Rather, he is saying, you are. As in already are. Even if you don’t know it. Even if you once knew it and forgot. Even if you have a hard time believing it.

Jesus is making to his disciples a promise about their very being, he is not commanding, let alone threatening, them about what they should be doing.

So many of us experience God as a divine law-maker and rule-enforcer rather than generous gift-giver. And because we experience God that way – always setting expectations that we can rarely live up to, we tend not to find as much inspiration and energy in our worship experience and faith lives as we might hope. We are a tired and weary people these days and if our faith becomes just one more chore it won’t be nearly as life-giving.

But in this passage, Jesus is making promises and giving out gifts. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. This is, like last week, sheer blessing. And, like the week before, it is about identity, about our very being, which in turn leads to doing.”<sup>1</sup>

Matt Skinner says “You are the light of the world. Not Jesus, but you. And the *you* is plural. You,are the light of the world.

I know the Gospel of John does it differently, identifying Jesus himself as “the light of the world.” But Matthew is on the stage this week.

I also know that your piety might lead you to say that Jesus is “the true light” (you’re switching to John again!) and that your role is merely to reflect or channel him. There’s truth to that, but don’t run so quickly past what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount: “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory” to God.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/01/epiphany-5-a-promises-not-commands/>

Light always has effects. It always illuminates. Salt, likewise, always makes its presence known. That's the way things are.

If Jesus' words about the effects his hearers are going to have on the world aren't enough to amaze you, consider who the audience is for the Sermon on the Mount. There are no obvious world-changers gathered around him on the hill. It's a crowd of ordinary people. Probably a lot of disappointed people. Definitely some desperate people. People who've been told they don't count for much. Scared people.

No seminary professors who insist on the power of theological precision or their pet orthodoxies. No celebrity authors who make a comfortable living writing and speaking to large audiences. No famous preachers who seem to produce effortless eloquence every time they ascend a pulpit. In fact, if we take Matthew 5:11-12 as our cue, Jesus is speaking to people who are (or who are about to be) "reviled" and "persecuted." Singling out that category of people as "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world" seems absurd. But so too were the Beatitudes at the beginning of his sermon."<sup>2</sup>

Lets be honest - it is hard to believe these days. Look at the state of the world.

But once you believe you are salt and light – not simply becoming or hoping to be but actually are – then and only then can you continue to be salt and light, letting their light shine so that people will see their good works and give thanksgiving and glory to God. And that matters, because if ever there was a time when we needed to be blessed with the gifts of salt and light it's right now. Check the headlines; listen to the news; glance over the social media pages – there is an unusually pervasive sense of dis-ease in our world and the divisions evident in our world don't skip over us as a congregation. Which is why we need to be reminded that we are salt and light. Last week we saw Jesus called blessed all kinds of people the world doesn't always call blessed. What does this say about the God who sends Jesus and the communities called to follow him? Those who mourn and are meek. Those who are poor in spirit and merciful. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. These are the people God blesses and calls us to bless. This is a difficult time for many people and for many reasons. We need salt and light in this world. And the crazy thing is that God has already provided it...right in and through you and the person sitting next to you and in front of you.

I want to invite you to take a moment now. Just a brief moment and I want you to ponder something that you might not ponder often in church. I want you to ponder where you have been salt and light this week. When have you blessed someone, when have you shone a light or offered some salt to a soul that needed a little flavour. Jesus says you are salt, you are light - do you believe it? Take a moment to see it.

And now I want to encourage you to do something else. You might be able to do it right now in this very moment with the person sitting beside you or you might do it at another time in the week but this week I want you to tell someone when you have seen God's light shine through them. When they have brought light to a place that needed to be brightened or even salt to something that needed a little more flavour.

Jesus is making promises today, and we are all about to be changed by them.

Thanks be to God.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5411>

Amen.