

“Salt and Light”
Matthew 5:13-20
February 8, 2026
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Thursday night just after I had drifted off to sleep, I was awakened by the sound of a text message notification. My daughter was sending me a screen shot of a social media post that had been posted at some point that evening by another student at her school. People were sharing the screenshot and urging each other to stay safe because the photo was a photo of a gun and a message saying the student planned to bring the gun to school and kill people the next day. The threat seemed to be related to a fight that had happened at the school earlier that day that became dangerous enough that the principal put the campus on lock-down until it was resolved. That afternoon I had received a message from the principal about the fight and the lock-down, and when I picked Vanessa up from school, she told me what she had heard about what went on- someone got tazed, the principal got punched, multiple fights were going on at once. I don't know how factual all of those details were, but it was a serious situation. The social media post did get reported and by the morning the principal reported to parents that the student that made the threat had been arrested.

This was the first time I had seen a real screen shot from a student making a threat, but this isn't the first time that there have been fights on the school campus that resulted in students getting arrested or the first time that we have been informed about threats of violence. Unfortunately, it has become a somewhat normal

occurrence, and as I was lying there trying to go back to sleep that night, I felt a mix of anger and sadness. Earlier in the day I had been feeling angry as I thought about the principal having to manage these kinds of things – which, to her credit, she seems to do with an enormous amount of strength and serenity, but as I thought about that student, whoever it was, who was at home posting a picture of a gun and expressing a desire to kill people, I felt sad also. How or why did this student become convinced, even if just for a few moments, that killing people or threatening to kill people was the best option? What is going on in that student's life or in the lives of the other students who were involved in the fights? Is violence the best option because they don't see anything or anyone that gives them hope? Of course, I don't know these students or anything about their lives, but it seemed quite possible that the world feels like a very dark place to them, and not just to them. There is real darkness present in our world that prompts desperate acts and leads to despair.

On Thursday night I was feeling the weight of this reality, but then the Scripture that we just read this morning that I'd been thinking about all week came to mind. "*You* are the salt of the earth...*you* are the light of the world." Thank you, Jesus, was the first thing I thought. These words were a balm for my hurting heart because they reminded me that no matter how heavy and pervasive the darkness in this world is, it is not *all* there is. There is a Light that shines in the darkness, and chases it away, and will ultimately overcome it forever, and we know who the Light is. Jesus is the Light of the World, and thanks be to God, we have seen him and he has shined into our lives to chase away the darkness and give us the light that leads to life. I was deeply

comforted by this truth, but at the same time, I felt a renewed sense of the importance of Jesus's call to us, his church.

Our friends, and neighbors, our community, and our world need the faithful witness of Jesus's followers. We have been sent out into the world to show with our lives that there is a different way to live. It's the way that God intends and the way we have learned from Jesus. It's the way that Jesus describes in the Sermon on the Mount -which is the context of our passage - a way that isn't rooted in fear, or motivated by greed, or driven by self-interest. It is the way that is centered on God and rooted in and sustained by love. It is the way that looks foolish to this world, but is, in truth, the way that leads to real and abundant life.

When I think about the darkness that still persists, and I think about the hurt, and the misery, and the hopelessness that it perpetuates, I am encouraged to know that God has a plan and I think it's both humbling and exciting to realize that it's God's plan to use me and *us* to be the salt that preserves and the light that helps make God visible, but there is also a warning in Jesus's words that we must not overlook. You are the salt of the earth, *but* if salt has lost its taste, how can it be restored? You are the light of the world. People do not light a lamp and put it under a bushel basket. Jesus is saying if we are truly going to make the difference that he has sent us to make, and if we are truly going to bring hope to the hopeless and healing where it is so desperately needed, we have to stay salty and keep the light burning bright.

Jesus's words are meant to challenge us, and they were meant to challenge the people of Israel who were his original audience when he said these things. They were losing their saltiness, and they weren't faithfully living in to their calling to be God's light to the world. NT Wright's commentary on this is enlightening. He says, *"God had called Israel to be the salt of the earth; but Israel was behaving like everyone else, with its power politics, its factional squabbles, its militant revolutions. How could God keep the world from going bad – the main function of salt in the ancient world- if Israel, his chosen 'salt,' had lost its distinctive taste? In the same way, God called Israel to be the light of world. Israel was the people through whom God intended to shine his bright light into the world's dark corners, not simply to show up evil but to enable people who were blundering around in the dark to find their way. But what if the people called to be the light-bearers had become part of the darkness?"*

Wright asks two important questions that are worth asking ourselves. The first. If we are behaving like everyone else, rather than behaving distinctively, how can God use us to keep the world from going bad? And the second. How can we help others find their way out of the dark, if the people called to be light-bearers have become part of the darkness? Those may not be easy or comfortable questions to ask, but if are serious about saying yes to Jesus's call and serious about sharing his love, they are questions that we can't afford to avoid.

Along with those two very important questions, we might also ask ourselves about simple complacency which is what I felt a bit

guilty of that night when I was laying my bed feeling sad and mad about the world. At the presbytery meeting yesterday, we heard an inspired sermon from the outgoing moderator. He addressed the concern that so many in the church have today about the decline in membership which leads to fretting and obsessing about “what’s going to happen to us?” It is possible for churches to become so inwardly focused that we neglect our calling to be salt and light. It is possible in our own lives to be so wrapped up in our own little world, that we don’t see or pay attention to people who are stumbling around in the darkness right in front of us. Our moderator challenged us not to get wrapped up in the kind of thinking that draws our focus in on ourselves and takes our vision and energy away from the communities and the world that we have been sent to love and serve.

There was a line that I wrote down when I was reading NT Wright’s commentary on our passage this week, and along with the other questions that have been posed, I think this one serves as a very good take home point. That question is, “where does the world need salt and light right now, and how can we, through following Jesus, provide it?”

Following Jesus faithfully, and consistently is sometimes a difficult thing for fallible human disciples like ourselves to do, and chances are, we do sometimes blend in and participate in the actions that are rotting our world instead of living as the salt that helps preserve it. Sometimes, maybe we do lose the sense of urgency about being salt and light, but if we have failed, God’s grace and mercy abound. Despite any failures on our part, it is still God’s plan

to use us. Jesus still sends us to bear his light and to invite others to come near and taste the life that he gives. This is confirmed in the baptism that we had today! It's exciting for Zelina and her parents – a sign to them that she is loved and chosen by God – but it's a sign for all of us, too. A sign that God is still calling out a people and making us into a community that lives to bear witness to his life and the reality of his kingdom. We shouldn't think that we can be salt and light without the grace upon grace that Jesus gives or without the power of the Holy Spirit who lives and works within us, but we should think that we can with Jesus's help.

I hope that this week there won't be any more phone calls about threats or acts of violence on the school campus. That would be a blessing, but even if that blessing comes, there will still be people, like those students who got in trouble last week, who are struggling and stumbling and in need of some glimmer of light that might bring hope and even a whole new life in Christ. You and I may be the ones that can provide that glimmer. If you are willing to let the light of Jesus shine through you, I'm going to invite you now to put up your finger and sing with me as a sign of our desire to follow him and live as his light in this world.

This little light of mine....Amen.