

Psalm 112: 1, 4-9 (10); Matthew 5: 13-16 The Lamp in the Valley

At the very end of Psalm 112 Dee read for us, a beautiful psalm of praise that affirms the blessedness of those who revere God, comes these harsh words: “The wicked see it and are angry; they gnash their teeth and melt away; the desire of the wicked comes to nothing.” The New Revised Common Lectionary, a program that assigns Scripture passages as a unit of lesson called “pericope,” made this last verse, verse 10, optional. So, if the preacher wanted, she or he could choose not to read the last verse.

Why would she do that? Perhaps because these harsh words on the “wicked” are the kind of Bible verses that make many of us uncomfortable, if not downright cringe. Except for those who are thoroughly self-righteous and have no self-awareness, we know we all fall short of always seeking God’s will and following the Way of God. That’s why we pray the prayer of confession.

Then there is the unfortunate reality that, over the history of the church, there has been a practice of shaming, or guilt, or scaring people up to heaven. So, it’s no wonder if some of us have come to hear these words as personal judgment and condemnation of us.

But are they? “The wicked see it and are angry; they gnash their teeth and melt away; the desire of the wicked comes to nothing.” It doesn’t say, “if you are naughty, then you get this!” It is describing how the wicked are and what they do. Just as the rest of this psalm is a description of those who stand in awe of God and follow God’s will, it is a statement of how things are.

It is a declaration that the evil has no chance, ultimately, of succeeding. To skip over the last verse would have meant to ignore the reality of all sorts of wickedness that resist the goodness of God, whether it is within ourselves or in our society. In this “difficult to hear” last verse is the Good News that the world does not belong to Satan, the personification of Evil, but to God, its creator.

Jesus’s message at its core is also a declaration and the Good News of the kingdom of heaven: God rules supreme. Matthew summarizes Jesus’s ministry as a ministry of "teaching and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness." Jesus declares that the kingdom of heaven is near, and from this reality follows his action of healing.

Today's Gospel lesson from Matthew comes right after the Beatitudes we listened to last week. Jesus is still on the mountain speaking to his disciples and the crowds that had gathered to listen to him. To them he declares "You are the salt of the earth" and "You are the light of the world." Like in Japanese, in Greek you don't need to explicitly state the subject in a sentence, but here Jesus makes the point of saying "hey, you; I'm talking to you all." You, collectively.

Talk about a blanket statement! Are you sure, Jesus? I'm not so sure about this guy right here; he isn't looking the part. Or she over there is looking pretty dim. But Jesus is not scrutinizing them to see if they are good enough or if they have what it takes to be the salt or the light of the world. There was no fence, no gate-keeper, and no check-point at the foothills to be in his audience; just an invitation, on God's initiative, and all they did was to "come and see."

To all those who come to him, Jesus says "You Are This." He doesn't say "you might have a potential to be the salt of the earth," but rather, "You are the salt of the earth." And for salt, being salty is not optional but its identity. Jesus doesn't say "You need to shine a bit brighter," but rather, "let your light shine."

He names our reality in God and from knowing who we are, our actions follow. We come to Jesus and learn who we are and knowing who we are tells us what we are to do. This is about our life of discipleship within the community that is charged with a mission to the world; it is about being the church.

So, what does it mean for us, as the church, to be the salt of the earth or the light of the world? These two metaphors are rich and have many layers of meaning, but what's common to both is that they serve a purpose; they are useful; they are for something. The church does not exist for its own sake.

The church inwardly, that is to say, for the members of the body of Christ, it is a home, where we are fed and nourished by the words of the Scriptures and by the bread and the cup at the Lord's Table, where we receive the presence of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. The church for us is a home with God the Parent and the sisters and brothers in Christ. But we do not exist unto ourselves.

At the same time, the church externally, or outwardly, proclaims to the world the Good News of the kingdom of heaven. Last week, we began our Annual Congregational Meeting by reading the Mission Statement of our church. It starts with these words: Our mission is to serve

God in the Jemez Valley by - - - , and the last bullet point read: by “shining the light of God’s love to the world around us.” What does that look like?

A pastor friend of mine recently told me this. Someone asked her “what can our church do for the community?” “What mission should we undertake?” Her advice, she told me, was “Look at the community and see what the community around the church already has and think of what the church could add to it.” “How can the church contribute to the vitality of the community?” she was saying.

During the Annual Meeting, we also learned that different community groups use our church space throughout the year. We say the church is not the building but the people in it. That said, our physical church building is one of the gifts we’ve been offering our community. True, the church is not the building, but just as our body language can communicate a lot, the physical church can speak through its body language.

Again, during the annual meeting, we listened to the financial report and learned that we are lean; there is no “fluff” in the church budget. Your Session has been working hard so that the message of the church’s “body language” remains welcoming and hospitable to all in the Valley community, while being fiscally responsible to honor the gift of people’s offerings, which is majority of where the money comes from. It takes real effort and deep faith.

“Being the light” is a metaphor, but it is a metaphor for a reason. When we spend money on our building, whether it is to keep it warm and comfortable enough to be welcoming to the community groups and worshippers, or to keep the outside lamps on when it’s dark, again, to be an inviting, warm presence in the community, or when you give your time and energy on our “Luv Your Church Day,” it is one of many ways of letting our light shine in this community.

“You are the salt of the earth.” We are not called to “try harder to be saltier” but to accept our calling as salt, because Jesus says we are, and let our mission in action flow from our understanding of what salt does. As a metaphor, salt has rich layers of meaning, but one thing it is known widely is as a preservative.

In Japan, there is a simple boxed lunch which was known as the poor people’s lunch. White rice is packed tight in a rectangular box, with a single, red, salted plum and nothing else; it looked like the Japanese national flag. It not only preserved the rice when the farmers had to work in the field or the soldiers had to travel distance without refrigeration, but, in the environment of food scarcity, it also provided necessary salt. Sea salt contains sodium,

magnesium, potassium, and calcium, all of which we need for optimal health. Salt is a source of our vitality when the environment is not supportive of life.

Light shines in the darkness. Salt preserves life in an otherwise inhospitable condition. Just as the Psalmist acknowledges the “angry wicked” in the world, conflict is never far from human experience, but Jesus proclaimed the good news among people living in struggle and hoping for change, and has entrusted us to carry on his ministry, as the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Let us imagine together how to live even more fully into these metaphors. Let us pray.