

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL

February 9, 2014

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Gloria Hopewell

Texts--Isaiah 58: 1-9a and Matthew 5: 13-20

Isn't it amazing how the writer of Matthew's Gospel knew how prominently both salt and light have figured in our lives in recent days? The millions and millions of tons of salt being poured on our roadways and sidewalks and drives to enable us to get around with some measure of safety? The extravaganzas of light and fireworks at both last Sunday's Super Bowl and the opening ceremonies of the winter Olympic Games in Sochi?

Of course, though it might be possible that Jesus or Matthew had heard of the ancient Olympic Games in Greece, they would not have experienced the relays of the Olympic torches passing from runner to runner, town to town, from Olympia, Greece to the place where the games are held. But I can't help but think that they might appreciate the symbolic connection of that flame being carried from country to country, generation to generation--an attempt to unite us through athletic competition if not through politics. A longstanding tradition that shines forth in fresh expressions each time.

I remember years ago when the summer games were held in Atlanta. The Olympic torch passed through my town, but out of forgetfulness or scheduling conflicts, I missed and had to just hear from others about the grand celebration--school children bused to the site, and bands gathering by the railroad tracts to watch it pass by on a flatbed car. Imagine my delight 10 days later to be grabbing a bite to eat in an Albany, NY hotel and watching that flame go right by the window where I had a front row view!

Jesus and Matthew also did not know about the capacity of salt for melting snow. Did they ever even see snow? Salt in their day was a precious commodity--and an

expensive one, probably most valued as a preservative for their food. The flavor it gave was a bonus.

Our texts today are prophecies and teachings to peoples in times of trouble. People who need a light, a bit of seasoning. And, perhaps even some preservation. There were those in Isaiah's time, returning from exile, seeking God but not really knowing how to go about it. They had forgotten--or abandoned the covenant. They go through motions of worship and fasting, studying about God, wearing sack cloth and ashes and looking solemn. But God is clear and commands Isaiah to tell them, loudly that they're missing the point. The fast God wants is not necessarily a fast of food, depriving oneself of a few meals or looking pious, observing all the holy days but not living every day as if it is holy. In the words of Eugene Peterson's paraphrase, *The Message*:

6-9 *"This is the kind of fast day I'm after:*

*to break the chains of injustice,
get rid of exploitation in the workplace,
free the oppressed,
cancel debts.*

What I'm interested in seeing you do is:

*sharing your food with the hungry,
inviting the homeless poor into your homes,
putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad,
being available to your own families.*

Do this and the lights will turn on,

and your lives will turn around at once.

Your righteousness will pave your way.

The God of glory will secure your passage.

Then when you pray, God will answer.

You'll call out for help and I'll say, 'Here I am.'

Centuries later, Jesus' message to those under the power and control of the Roman Empire is not unlike that of Isaiah. As he often does, he uses the scribes and Pharisees as examples of ones, like those returning from the long-ago exile, who follow the law by going through the motions. To be his followers, they don't need to walk away from that law to something better or newer, they must take that law that has gone flat and bland and salt it, make it real, spicy, and tasty. And then show it to all the world.

We learn early, don't we, to be humble, not to brag or show off. That follows in our churches, I think. We are to be nice, not talk about what might offend or challenge. But we are called to be the light on the hill--the beam from the lighthouse, a people noticed for not being complacent and tasteless (well, Episcopalians cannot by definition be "without taste" but that's not what I mean!).

Our message should be: Grace Church--that's the church that lives out the Gospel. It feeds the hungry, it takes care of those in need. It shakes things up in town, working for justice!

And, notice this. Jesus does not say, "you can be salt, you can be light IF you obey this, IF you believe that. You ARE salt, you ARE light. Right now. Today. So be what you are.

The Olympic analogies begin to fall short at this point. Oh, athletes will continue to train, to hone their skills. Devote their lives for years for this chance. They will spice up their performances and let their lights shine. But ultimately, there will be just a few who reach gold. In God's Olympics, though, the gold is for all of us.

A few weeks ago, in one of our worship services at our initial Thrive! Retreat we reflected on this poem by Marianne Williamson:

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.

Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.

It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.

We ask ourselves,

Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?

Actually, who are you not to be?

You are a child of God.

Your playing small does not serve the world.

There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you.

We are all meant to shine, as children do.

We were born to make manifest
the glory of God that is within us.

It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.

And as we let our own light shine,
we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.

As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

So, let us not be shy. Let us remove the shades, throw open the doors, and let our light shine, not only up here on the hill of Prospect and Hill Streets, but let it bathe our city in its salty glow. Amen.