

Sermon for 5 Epiphany  
February 5, 2023  
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Los Alamos, New Mexico

Isaiah 58:1-12  
Psalm 112:1-10  
1 Corinthians 2:1-16  
Matthew 5:13-20

The Sermon on the Mount continues today in the Gospel,  
and it goes on for another two chapters.

It wasn't just the Beatitudes.

The Gospel today closes out with Jesus affirming the law  
and the prophets.

Next week we'll be told it's not just wrong to do things,  
but it's a sin to think about doing things.

After that, you'll need to read chapters seven and eight on your own.  
It's a long sermon, which I can venture to say,  
went on for more than twelve to fifteen minutes.

However, today we get seasoning and illumination.

Light is a constant image in the Bible. From the very beginning God separated the light from  
the dark.

Jesus uses the image of light to illuminate his challenge  
that we have been given the light of the Gospel to share,  
not to keep it to ourselves,  
to share it in remembrance of the one who gave the good news to us.  
I remember my grandmother's kitchen.

The house was built before electric lights.  
Gas pipes folded out and extended from walls  
so jets could be turned on and lit to provide light to the room.  
It was better than candles.  
I guess that's why the ceilings were so high.

The wood-burning stove, made by CopperClad,  
was an endless source of amusement.  
We'd wet our fingers and shake droplets onto the hot surface  
and watch the bubbling water dance until it boiled away.

The white enameled cabinet on the wall next to the pantry held her everyday china.

Behind its central accordion door was a flour sifter, and beneath a metal table top pulled out to provide a kneading surface. She kept a five-gallon tin of lard to one side.

Sometimes, for special occasions, I'd see her mixing bowl on the counter with a moistened towel hiding its contents.

After a time my brother and sister and I would come back from playing to find my mother, her sister and Mamma drinking coffee around the kitchen table. They'd smile and we'd each be given a slice of salt-rising bread slathered with butter.

“Jesus said, ‘You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?  
It is no longer good for anything,  
but is thrown out and trampled under foot.’”

Salt, NaCl, Sodium Chloride, is essential to human life. Salt is the primary source of sodium in the western diet, and sodium serves as an electrolyte to help nerves and muscles to function properly, and to regulate the water content of our internal organs. Without salt we die.

Salt has been integral to the development of civilization, and its use predates historic records.

Evidence of salt production has been dated as far back at 6000 B.C.

The earliest roads were built to sources of salt, including the first great Roman road.

In New Mexico a shallow salt lake about 50 miles south of Zuni Pueblo is known as the Zuni's sacred mother, Ma'l Oyattsik'I – Salt Woman.

The lake is considered sacred by most of the indigenous peoples of the Southwest, and is the source of ceremonial salt and the loci of pilgrimage trails for the peoples of the region.

Faith traditions often use salt as a talisman to ward off evil spirits,

and as a purifying agent.

In the Episcopal Church we use salt in the waters of baptism  
and in the holy water we use to bless the people.

We also often trample on salt in the winter  
after we spread it to melt ice  
and provide traction in slippery conditions.

But mostly we use salt for flavoring  
so Jesus' invocation of salt that has lost its flavor  
is immediately recognizable.

Today salt is plentiful and inexpensive,  
but in Jesus' time it was expensive and hard to come  
– a precious commodity –  
so it's no wonder Jesus uses salt to remark  
about the preciousness of his followers  
in calling them "the salt of the earth."

But the only way for salt to lose its savor,  
is for it to be diluted in water to separate it into its ionic components.

So Jesus seems to be cautioning his followers  
against losing their saltiness  
by watering down the message of the Gospel.

To be worth their salt,  
the disciples must ensure that the Gospel message  
is Good News to all of the people.

The Gospel message is the essential salt  
that not only flavors our lives but sustains the Body of Christ.

It is to be told. Isaiah and the Psalm tell us:

"Shout out, do not hold back!  
Lift up your voice like a trumpet!"  
Light shines in the darkness for the upright;  
The righteous are merciful and full of compassion.  
Share your bread with the hungry.  
Bring the homeless poor into your house.  
Clothe the naked.  
Then your light will break forth like the dawn.  
Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;  
you shall call for help, and the Lord will say, Here I am."