

## **“Dropping In” February 9th**

### ***Introduction:***

Well, friends. We’re continuing our journey through the Lectionary. Today’s texts, I think, together remind us of just how much our privilege obligates us, just as they remind us of how much we benefit from that privilege. I want to talk about both things, today. First: I’m going to pray!

### ***Prayer:***

### ***Returning:***

Let’s return to the end of last week’s moment in Matthew. Jesus has just declared that because he’s here, and because this hungry crowd around him has chosen to follow him, they’re privileged. All the things that they believed about themselves are lies, and Jesus invites them to claim their rights as privileged citizens of God’s Kingdom, and see their situations from God’s perspective.

Imagine you’re a part of that crowd:

We have in mind the privilege he’s just announced for us. We’ve been following him around, watching what

he does, hearing what he says about the Kingdom of God. This is the Messiah that we've been waiting and hoping for. But now he goes on to do what we always, always have to do, too--which is move from privilege to responsibility. Jesus moves here from privilege to responsibility.

Today's Lectionary Passage, Jesus' word to this crowd, to us, says:

***13 "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.***

***14 "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.***

### ***Salt & Light: Metaphors***

This is metaphor, here. Salt & Light don't "have

responsibilities” to be themselves. They just do what they do: Salt seasons and preserves, light enlightens, shines. Light that doesn’t enlighten, salt that doesn’t season or preserve; these things are, oh, they aren’t themselves anymore, right? They’ve lost their integrity. They are defined by what they do. Salt is salty, Light enlightens.

But when Jesus is talking to us, people who have the privilege of being part of the Kingdom of Heaven, we have responsibility. We can refuse to live up to what we’ve become in Christ. We can be salt that doesn’t season or preserve, light that doesn’t shine. Jesus isn’t threatening us when he says “if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? it is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.” He’s just telling us the truth. He’s telling us the truth that you can’t hide a city that’s on a hill, and that no one lights a lamp just to hide it, too. His point when he’s talking about the light is important.

He tells us, of course, that lamps are meant to provide light. Okay. We all buy that, right? A lamp that provides dark is not so useful. And he talks about this “city on a hill,” which most scholars suggest is a call

back to Jerusalem, the holy city on, as God calls it now and then, “the holy hill,” Mount Zion. Jesus is talking to people, this great crowd of people from all over, who are Israelites, who believe, whatever the particulars might be, that Jerusalem is the holiest city in the world, it’s not a place meant to be hidden, but was meant to be the place Isaiah promised, the “holy hill” where, someday, “They will neither harm nor destroy...for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”

It’s home to the Temple, the place where God chose to reside with people, the place where Heaven and Earth meet. Some of them will come to believe what Paul talks about in Romans 3, that Jesus in fact is the place where heaven and earth meet. But right now, they’re gathering around the one they believe to be the Messiah, who through word and deed has established, proven, that the Kingdom of Heaven is breaking out in the world, and that they themselves are privileged participations, members, of it. And Jesus is saying to them:

### ***Salt & Light: Responsibility***

“You are the light of the world!” This is shocking. He’s implying that whatever is meant to be true of the

Temple, is actually true of them, these privileged people. It's hard to get our heads around that, but it lines up well with Paul's promise to us that we, who together have the Holy Spirit, are the Temple of God, the place where God is active in the world right now.

So we are salt, seasoning and preserving the world. We are light, and whether our light is the good deeds we do that bring glory to God, or simply reveals the good deeds we do that bring glory to God, we're doing good deeds that bring glory to God. This privileged position we have in the world comes with a responsibility that we have to live up to. It would be easier if, like real salt and real light, we were who we were all the time, that there was no room for responsibility because there was no way to be irresponsible. But we don't have to season and preserve; we don't have to shine. It's not inevitable.

And so it means we have to be on guard that our blessed status, our privileges in this Kingdom of which we are citizens, results in all that it should: That good deeds come from us and that when people interact with us, they feel as if they are on holy ground, that the deeds we do, which echo Christ's own deeds, which come naturally out of us as the Spirit bears fruit

in and among us, that these things reveal to others God's presence with us and in us.

### ***Isaiah 58: Meaningless Religious Observance***

And this is not that different from what God discusses in the passage from Isaiah that was read to us. There, God declares through Isaiah the failure of His People, and redirects them to what real covenant faithfulness is. They're fasting, which is all well and good--a nice, religious thing. Something the Law itself called for, so to fast, well, great: To fast is to be religiously obedient. And obedience isn't bad. But obedience for obedience's sake is not faithfulness. Rule keeping for no reason other than to keep rules is not following God, it's not righteousness--that is, covenant faithfulness. It's just rule keeping.

Jesus gets this. Making this point known is part of what Jesus' purpose was. It's why he can say to those of us who follow him that "unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." Our righteousness, our covenant faithfulness, has to be more than keeping the letter of the law while ignoring its purpose.

Isaiah knows this. Through him, God describes a terrible, terrible situation:

***2 ...day after day they seek me out;  
they seem eager to know my ways,  
as if they were a nation that does what is right  
and has not forsaken the commands of its  
God.***

***They ask me for just decisions  
and seem eager for God to come near them.***

***3 'Why have we fasted,' they say,  
'and you have not seen it?  
Why have we humbled ourselves,  
and you have not noticed?'***

By their own estimation they're faithful. They are following the rules, keeping their vows in this covenant relationship that they have with God. And they don't seem to be thriving, you know? They don't feel like God is meeting their needs. They feel like they give and give but get nothing in return from God.

And God shuts down their bitterness and resentment by pointing out their own failure, their own false expectations, their own faithlessness.

***“Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please***

***and exploit all your workers.***

***4 Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife,  
and in striking each other with wicked fists.***

***You cannot fast as you do today  
and expect your voice to be heard on high.***

***5 Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,  
only a day for people to humble themselves?***

***Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed  
and for lying in sackcloth and ashes?***

***Is that what you call a fast,  
a day acceptable to the Lord?***

God will not allow his people to think that religious observance equals covenant faithfulness. You can give these things the same label, but that doesn’t make them the same thing.

***Isaiah 58:***

***Meaningful Religious Observance***

And God calls His People to a better way:

***6 “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:  
to loose the chains of injustice***



**and untie the cords of the yoke,  
to set the oppressed free  
and break every yoke?  
7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry  
and to provide the poor wanderer with  
shelter—  
when you see the naked, to clothe them,  
and not to turn away from your own flesh and  
blood?**

This is religious observance. This is a faithful life. This is covenant faithfulness. This is salt, light. And God makes a promise to His People, here in Isaiah:

**8 Then your light will break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing will quickly appear;  
then your righteousness[a] will go before you,  
and the glory of the Lord will be your rear  
guard.**

**9 Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;  
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am  
I.**

**“If you do away with the yoke of oppression,  
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,  
10 and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the  
hungry**

***and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,  
then your light will rise in the darkness,  
and your night will become like the noonday.  
11 The Lord will guide you always;  
he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched  
land  
and will strengthen your frame.  
You will be like a well-watered garden,  
like a spring whose waters never fail.  
12 Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins  
and will raise up the age-old foundations;  
you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls,  
Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.***

You will be the salt of the earth. You will be the light on a hill. You will matter, and instead of your name being mud it'll be the stuff solid walls are made of.

Let me linger here, though. I'm inspired by this, utterly. I am convinced that whatever else the Church is called to as Privileged Citizens of the Kingdom of God, who season and preserve the world like salt, and act as the place where God meets humanity, whatever else we're called to, we're called to the same things that Isaiah called God's people to.

## ***God's Sustaining Presence & An Honorable Reputation:***

And Isaiah's words come with this promise, this promise that the faithful integrity of God's people will result in two things: God's sustaining presence and an honorable reputation.

The faithful integrity of God's people will result in two things: God's sustaining presence and an honorable reputation. Psalm 112 declares "surely the righteous will never be shaken; they'll be remembered forever."

And yet, both Isaiah 58 and Psalm 112 also suggest that covenant faithfulness will result in more than God's presence, more than an honorable reputation that lasts forever, but will result in "our needs being satisfied," and even more than satisfied, that "good will come to us," as the Psalm puts it.

## ***Making Sense Then?***

The early Church tried to make sense of how Old Testament promises like these, promises of this-life material satisfaction, matched up with a crucified and resurrected Messiah, matched up with the experience of being persecuted and harassed and murdered.

They found hope in visions of the world as it would finally be, when Jesus returns, and promises of an age to come, death-and-violence-free, when covenant faithfulness would be rewarded in some eternal way that included material ease. They sought to prove, as Paul did, that whatever they believed, it was warranted, because their demonstrations of the Spirit's power warranted their belief, no matter how far-fetched their hopes seemed.

### ***Making Sense Now?***

That was then, and we're here now. In so many ways we're still waiting for what the earliest Church was waiting for. In so many ways we live motivated by the same hopes Isaiah's people were motivated by, too--only stretched out in the distance ahead of us, to a moment the arrival of which we can't even guess at.

And I think today's passages invite us to ask ourselves if God's presence and an honorable reputation are worth the work of covenant faithfulness? These are privileges we have as citizens of God's Kingdom now; they aren't the limit of them, but they are the ones we can count on.

We are here to season and preserve the world. We are

here to be the community in which people meet God. We are here to “to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke...to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter,” to “clothe [the naked] and not to turn away from [our] own flesh and blood.”

Look, Smoky Row, our reputation is good, and it's not our fault. God is with us, and it's not because we're particularly wonderful. This is us together. But each of us, personally: Where do you see God's sustaining presence in your life? What is your reputation in the world? If it is a good one, and we can articulate how God is revealing love to us, then no matter what else we find ourselves in, no matter what trouble or storm surrounds us or our people or our community, let's keep our eyes on these good things that we've been given, and in turn, let's give good away, because that's what God has adopted us to do as his children.

Make good on the reputation God's given you; sustain yourself with the presence of God alongside you. Be yourself – salt, light, repairer, restorer – as we wait for Christ, but aren't left waiting alone.