

Epiphany 5A (2/5/17)  
**Isaiah 58:1-9a [9b-12]**  
 Psalm 112:1-9 [10]  
 1 Corinthians 2:1-12 [13-16]  
**Matthew 5:13-20**

*Jesus gives us an identity, and that identity gives us a purpose. Even in a world seemingly overrun by shadows, Jesus' followers are light; it is our God-given function to "give light to all in the house." Steadfast love is a gift that streams forth from us, as true worship orients us to our neighbors in need.*

The late British author, Sir Terry Pratchett, tapped into a profound human anxiety when he wrote, "No matter how fast light travels, it finds that the darkness has always got there first, and is waiting for it." Light and shadow are perennial symbols of hope and fear, the power of life and the power of death. "I will give you as a light to the nations," Yahweh calls to the faithful servant in the Book of Isaiah, "that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."<sup>1</sup> "You are the light of the world," Jesus calls to his disciples in our Gospel from Matthew, "let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

But **light is often no more than a flicker in the darkness that surrounds us, darkness that "has always got there first, and is waiting for it."** How are we to receive divine words about light when we are engulfed by night, when we are overwhelmed by age-old animosities, shameless self-centeredness, painful injustice, senseless loss – all the realities of life on Earth

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 49:6.

that cause us to question God's efficacy? **What does salvation mean in a world where we see so much working against it?**

If we are, in fact, the light of the world, then we have our work cut out for us. What can we really accomplish in our little lives, no matter how earnestly we yearn for the kingdom of God? We may start by noticing that **Jesus' proclamation in our Gospel today is first and foremost a promise.<sup>2</sup> "You *are* the light of the world." Full stop. Jesus begins by giving us an identity, a fundamental dignity.** It's only once we've internalized our God-given identity that we can begin to understand our God-given function: "You are the light of the world. ...let your light shine before others...." A lamp's singular purpose is to "give light to all in the house," so it would be unnatural to cover it once it's been lit.<sup>3</sup> That's what it's for. In the same way, "you are the light of the world." It's your singular purpose to "let your light shine before others, so they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." You are Jesus' disciples; it's what you're for.

So, take heart in his promise. You *are* light. Nevertheless, the question remains: What exactly does it mean to "let your light shine before others"? For most of us, letting our light shine mostly means dragging ourselves out of bed on Sunday mornings and coming to church. Of course, **worship is the focal point of our shared life of faith. We are gathered by the Holy Spirit, fed**

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<sup>2</sup> See David Lose, <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/01/epiphany-5-a-promises-not-commands/>.

<sup>3</sup> Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 138.

**with God's word of hope and a meal of grace, then sent out again refreshed. We are a communion of saints, fellow members of the body of Christ. Our light certainly shines here, doesn't it?**

But the prophet Isaiah cautions against restricting our light to this place and this time. "Is not this the fast I choose," God speaks through the prophet in our first reading,

to loose the bonds of injustice, ...to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

**True worship means becoming a sign of hope for desperate people, manifesting the steadfast love of God to those who need it most. In other words, it means letting your light shine in the depth of the shadows.**

Pastor Andrew Foster Connors tells a story about what's at stake:

*[Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1, 318].*

"What concerns God is... how worship reorders us." **We are gathered again today around the promise that by water and Spirit we are swept up into the life of the risen Christ. Even in a world seemingly overrun by shadows, dear church, you are light. Nothing can change that, not even your own feelings of insignificance or doubt.** It is your God-given purpose to shine, so let the love of God stream from you to those around you, and especially to your neighbors in need.