

How Will We be Salty and Light-bearing?

Beloved community, as we reflect on our scripture readings for this morning, let's wonder together: How will we be present in the flavorful way of salt and in the illuminating, brightening ways of light?

Let us pray: God, be with us as we wonder how each of us can specifically be brinier and brighter with your love and justice. And as we enter into sacred discomfort, grant us the serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, the courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to discern the one from the other. Amen.

Fellow sojourners, let's hear these words of deep wisdom from Presbyterian minister and author Frederick Buechner: *"One life on this Earth is all that we get, whether it is enough or not enough, and the obvious conclusion would seem to be that at the very least we are fools if we do not live it as fully and bravely and beautifully as we can."* I'll read it again. *"One life on this Earth is all that we get, whether it is enough or not enough, and the obvious conclusion would seem to be that at the very least we are fools if we do not live it as fully and bravely and beautifully as we can."*

Both the prophet Isaiah and Jesus implore us today to let our lights shine. And they seem to be on the same page, trusting that the light we bear springs from God's love and justice. We are each responsible for discerning how that might most effectively happen in our individual lives. **I wonder: How will your light shine as fully and bravely and beautifully as it can during the one life you have to live?**

I invite you to close your eyes for a moment if you are comfortable doing so, place one hand gently on your belly and the other hand gently on your heart and hear these words: *Let go and let God.*

Keeping your eyes closed, notice your first sensory response to those words. *Let go and let God.*

You might open your eyes again now. Did you feel comfort? Disturbance? The simple word “let” can be quite powerful. Letting go can sound and feel like yielding, like a form of surrender. If you readily trust and depend on the goodness and competence of others, you might typically approach your daily work and relationships with a healthy measure of letting go. If you tend to operate from a strong need for autonomy, you might typically aim to manage or control many components of your personal and work life and find it hard to let go.

While meditating on today’s Scripture texts, I grappled with my own discomfort with the phrase *let go and let God*. I have often judged letting go to be a radically passive act. I think of myself as quite active in the ways I function, so the elevation of letting go as a virtuous act has often frustrated me. My self-talk has sounded something like this: Well, of course, I WANT to let go and let God take care of things. I’ve appreciated many people in my life who’ve been loving, capable and skilled at letting go. But I’m just not wired that way and God must know that! It feels so unnatural to let go when I feel a need to keep it all together. And somewhere inside that self-talk is unchecked pride that reinforces a sense that holding a steady grip on circumstances would be the stronger, better way of functioning.

I believe there is deeper wisdom in realizing that letting go, yielding, trusting God’s work in our lives is not really passive at all. Actually, letting go is difficult work that we must consciously choose. The art and skill of ‘letting go and letting God’ is an intentional part of living “*as fully and bravely and beautifully as we can.*”

Today's readings challenge us to be increasingly open channels for God's love and justice to shine forth in the world. Let's hear again some of the words of challenge from Isaiah. Open your senses to what Isaiah is saying to you at this time in your life about the work you need to do in your personal life and the work you need to do as you engage within our society.

In much of today's reading, Isaiah draws on sacred imagination to give voice to the Spirit of God. We heard: *"They seek me daily, they long to know my ways, like a nation that wants to act with integrity and not ignore the Law of its God. They ask me for laws that are just, they long for God to draw near."*

Isaiah then names the hypocrisy of people crying out to God to make justice happen while they continue to hate, bully and oppress each other. That voice of God continued: *"This is the sort of fast that pleases me: Remove the chains of injustice! Undo the ropes of the yoke! Let those who are oppressed go free, and break every yoke you encounter! Share your bread with those who are hungry, and shelter homeless poor people! Clothe those who are naked, and don't hide from the needs of your own flesh and blood! Do this, and your light will shine like the dawn—and your healing will break forth like lightning! Your integrity will go before you, and the glory of God will be your rearguard."*

Our light will only shine like the dawn and our healing will only break forth like lightning if we actively choose to let God work through the actions we take, the ways we interact with others.

Again, we can feel echoes of Frederick Buechner's words: *"One life on this Earth is all that we get, whether it is enough or not enough, and the obvious conclusion would seem to be that at the very least we are fools if we do not live it as fully and bravely and beautifully as we can."*

I wonder: Who has modeled for you fullness, bravery and beauty in their work of letting God's love and justice shine through their life?

And I also wonder: For whom might you be modeling a way of life – and are you modeling full, brave, beautiful ways of letting go in order to shine?

Let's shift to our gospel reading for this morning. Can you see the hope-filled compassion in Jesus' eye and hear it in his voice as he connected with the group gathered with him on the mountainside?

"You are the salt of the Earth. But what if salt were to lose its flavor? How could you restore it? You are the light of the world. You don't light a lamp, then put it under a bushel basket, do you? No, you set it on a stand where it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, your light must shine before others so that they may see your good acts and give praise to your Abba God in heaven."

Take courage, Jesus seemed to say. Your salty flavor is rooted in God's love and justice. Share that flavor in all circumstances. Because love and justice are imprinted within you, you are capable of shining outwardly to illuminate and brighten the way with love and justice as your path intersects with others.

Jesus also said: *"Don't think I've come to abolish the Law and the Prophets. I have come not to abolish them, but to fulfill them, The truth is, until heaven and Earth pass away, not the smallest letter of the Law, not even the smallest part of the letter, will be done away with until it is all fulfilled."*

Jesus gave his whole self to modeling the law of Love - the greatest commandments: *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."*

This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Jesus aspired to fulfill the law of love, to live his life as a continually faithful response to the guiding reminders of that law offered by the prophets of his Jewish tradition.

What a challenge we receive through Jesus’ dream that the law of love could be completely fulfilled within the Earth community!

One more time, I offer words from the wise Frederick Buechner: *“One life on this Earth is all that we get, whether it is enough or not enough, and the obvious conclusion would seem to be that at the very least we are fools if we do not live it as fully and bravely and beautifully as we can.”*

We are now going to invite ourselves into two minutes of silence during which we will consider the sermon response form tucked in the back of our bulletins. We are experimenting with incorporating this spiritual practice into our worship services with more frequency. It would be an honor and privilege for me to hold your reflections in my own prayers and respond to you privately in coming days. (Those of you who shared responses last Sunday will receive responses from me this evening.) This sermon response form becomes one gift you might place in the offering plate later in the service if we wish.

Today’s response sheet is entitled “Models of salt and light.” For those with us via live stream, our tech team will place it front of the camera. We will also attach it to my sermon, which we will post to our website next Tuesday. The prompts for this morning are:

- (First) *This person has modeled for me fullness, bravery and beauty as they let God’s love and justice flavor and shine through their life: _____ . This is what they modeled for me:*

- (And then) *One or more persons for whom I am modeling a way of life: _____ . I long for God to empower my fullness, bravery and beauty as I aim to model being salty and shining light in this aspect of life:*

Let us take time now to be in silence as we ponder these questions or simply receive the gift of silence. *[long pause]*

What a countercultural gift silence is! As the singing bowl's vibrations welcome us back to the people and space surrounding us, would anyone like to say aloud simply the name of someone who has been their model or for whom you know you are modeling? Shall we hear a Spirit-led cacophony of names? *[brief pause]*

As our time of reflection comes to a close, I invite you to once again close your eyes if you are comfortable doing so. Perhaps rest your hands in an open posture on your lap.

Receive Jan Richardson's blessing "Blessed are You Who Bear the Light" from her book, *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons*.

Blessed are you

who bear the light
in unbearable times,
who testify
to its endurance
amid the unendurable,
who bear witness
to its persistence
when everything seems
in shadow
and grief.

Blessed are you

in whom
the light lives,
in whom
the brightness blazes—
your heart
a chapel,
an altar where
in the deepest night
can be seen
the fire that
shines forth in you
in unaccountable faith,
in stubborn hope,
in love that illumines
every broken thing
it finds.

Friends, let's be full, brave, and beautiful! Let welcome the salt of God's love and justice to find a way of distribution through us. Let's welcome the light of love and justice to shine through us because Love is counting on us. Amen!

Rev. Clare Gromoll
People's Congregational Church (Bayport, MN)
February 5, 2023 (5th Sunday after Epiphany)
Isaiah 58: 1-9a, Matthew 5:13-19

Models of Salt and Light

This person has modeled for me fullness, bravery and beauty as they let God's love and justice flavor and shine through their life: _____ . This is what they modeled for me:

One or more persons for whom I am modeling a way of life: _____ . I long for God to empower my fullness, bravery and beauty as I aim to model being salty and shining light in this aspect of life: