

Epiphany 5 (A)
February 9, 2020
Texts: Matthew 5:13-20

Pastor Aaron Couch
First Immanuel Lutheran Church
Portland, Oregon

Several years ago, right after Christmas we traveled to Olympia to be with Melinda's family to celebrate the holidays. We were looking forward to enjoying a week together, but we had no idea just how much togetherness we'd end up enjoying. We arrived in Olympia barely ahead of a huge winter storm that was sweeping down from Alaska. It dumped sleet and ice everywhere. The roads were impossible to get out on, and the ice was so heavy it started bringing down trees and power lines. During our first day there, the lights went off, and they stayed off the whole week.

That week became a bit of an adventure. Instead of cooking the Christmas turkey in the oven, we cooked it in the barbeque on the porch. At night, we could hear loud cracks and crashes as big branches from the huge Douglas firs all around the house broke under the weight of the ice and came crashing to the ground. But I especially remember how, when night came, it was really, really dark. We ate all our meals by candlelight. We did everything by candlelight! Fortunately, there was a big wood stove in the front room, so the house stayed toasty warm.

And one of my favorite memories of that Christmas is of playing dominoes at the dining room table. It was our evening entertainment. Everyone would crowd around the table, and on the table were all of the candles and oil lamps we could find. The light filled the room, bathing every face in a warm glow. Everyone played dominoes. We all laughed together and had a wonderful time. I don't know that it would have been nearly as much fun if the electricity had been on, and people could have gone to this room to watch TV, or that room to read a book, or out to the workshop in the garage to do some project. But in the warm, happy candlelight, with everyone together, it was almost magical.

Jesus knew what amazing power light has. Imagine living in Nazareth or Capernaum 2000 years ago. Nobody had to worry about the electric lights going off because there were no electric lights. There were no streetlights. At night, there was nothing but the light of the moon waxing and waning, and the twinkling of the stars. And indoors, perhaps a family would have a small oil lamp to light. It might not put out a great deal of light, but against the vast darkness of the night sky and the whole dark world, even that little bit of light could illumine the whole house. It could help people find their way, and not stumble or fall. It was a genuine treasure.

People of God, Jesus says that you are the light of the world. Have you paused lately to notice what is magical about your life? What is a treasure about your life? I mean, there are times when life itself can be pretty magical... seeing the sun rise; hearing birds sing; breathing in the fresh air, or feeling a breeze on your face; holding a loved one close, or sharing a quiet moment together; watching children grow; sharing laughter with friends; even clean sheets, or a warm shower. Life is full of magic, full of treasures.

But it seems that the spell can be so easily broken, the treasure stolen. All it really takes is listening to the news! Or getting up on the wrong side of the bed in a grumpy mood. But even if you wake up happy and rejoicing in life, sometimes it can be difficult to maintain that positive outlook. It can be hard to remember what there is to be thankful for, in the face of loss and

grief and worry; or chronic pain or sleepless nights; or loneliness; or concern for people who are hungry or homeless; or for the vastness of human suffering, fed by war and cruelty and greed and violence and selfishness and indifference. It can feel as though every bit of light has been swallowed up by the darkness. It can make us forget the magic, forget the treasure.

That's why Jesus invites us to follow him in his way, to restore the magic. It's not a command. It's just a statement of fact: You are the light of the world! Although it's not just you. It is the eternal, limitless, powerful love of God present in you, working through you and through all of God's people. I've seen it. I've seen it in you, and in so many others whose lives really do shine. I've seen rich blessing flow through you when you've given freely and joyfully to feed hungry neighbors. I've seen blessing flow when you've walked the extra mile to try to heal relationships and overcome differences. I've seen light shine in your expressions of kindness, when you've been willing to set aside what you're doing to help someone in need. I have felt the magic when you've given of yourself and your abilities so that others can experience this community as a place of peace, of forgiveness, of hope, a community in which God is present to heal our spirits and give us strength to face the challenges that life brings. People of God, you are the light of the world.

So when Jesus goes on to talk about fulfilling the Law and having a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, he's not talking about earning God's favor to get into heaven. He's talking about letting the light shine. It's about living in a way that makes space for experiencing the wonder of God's presence here and now. The law becomes a problem if we use it to show God how good and deserving we are. But that's not what God gave the law for—the law is God's gift to help shape our lives. The heart of the law is this: loving God with our whole heart and loving our neighbor as ourselves. That's how the light can shine in our lives, in our community.

You see, there are plenty of people in the world who seem to be loving mostly just themselves, but that doesn't help anybody find their way in the darkness. It doesn't create much space for experiencing the wonder of God's presence here and now. And it seems like there are plenty of people who don't seem to be feeling much love at all, who are trying to escape life by keeping themselves distracted and busy all the time, or sedated with TV or food or alcohol all the time. But that doesn't help anybody find their way in the darkness. It doesn't make much space for experiencing the wonder of God's presence here and now.

You are the light of the world. That light is already shining; the magic is present—the magic of God with us and for us, to be our light and help us find our way in life, and to illumine the way for others as well. The light is God's light, shining its warm glow on us and through us. The magic is God's magic, at work in us and for us and through us for others. The blessing is God's blessing, touching our lives and then the lives of our friends and neighbors, and maybe even our enemies. The treasure is God's treasure, God's great, infinite, costly, priceless treasure, entrusted to us, given into our hands, filling our lives so that God might enrich everyone we meet. Thanks be to God. Amen