

8 February 2026

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A

Trinity, St. Louis

The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, Rector

*Isaiah 9:1-4*

*Psalm 27:1, 5-13*

*1 Corinthians 1:10-18*

*Matthew 4:12-23*

*In the Name of the One, Holy, and Living God. Amen.*

Today, we walk in on the second act of what we have come to call the Sermon on the Mount. We missed the first act – the Beatitudes – because we were busy paying attention to the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple last week. Today, we get to settle back into Matthew's Gospel and relax when we hear some well-known words.

"You are the salt of the earth." "You are the light of the world." These are very familiar phrases, aren't they? We've heard them all our lives. But how, I wonder, do we actually hear them? You won't be surprised when I suggest that generations of Christians, and you and I, have put our own spin on these verses.

Many of us grew up thinking about God primarily as a rule-giver – THE rule giver, the *disappointed* rule giver. So, it's easy to come to the conclusion that our place in God's kingdom is established by how well we keep those rules.

As a result, we might hear Jesus telling his disciples – *and us* – that they'd *better be* salt and light. Or, perhaps, this is *how to become* salt and light.

But is that what's really going on here? Let's look at the text. What does Jesus say? "You are the salt of the earth." "You are the light of the world." For the grammar geeks among us, there's nothing imperative or conditional here. The verb is in the indicative mood, which makes it a flat-out declaration and sheer promise: *You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.* No ifs, ands, or buts about it.

Can you believe that? I mean, literally? Can you *believe* that?

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Why choose salt and light as images for blessedness? Both salt and light were precious commodities in Jesus' time. Both sustain life. Neither can be produced easily; they fulfill their purpose only in relationship. We've spent much of the season of Epiphany exploring the image of light, so I want to focus today on salt. What might being salt mean?

From the beginning of civilization until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, salt was one of the most sought-after commodities in human history. Until recently, salt was precious; no one worried about a low-sodium diet.

The ancients believed that salt would ward off evil spirits; religious covenants were often sealed with salt. Salt was important medically: to disinfect, stop bleeding, and stimulate thirst. To this day, in some places, salt is used to make holy water, and to cleanse the altar on Maundy Thursday. Salt, along with bread, is an essential gift of hospitality in many cultures.

In the millennia before refrigeration, salt was essential for food preservation. The Romans salted their vegetables, thus our word salad. Roman soldiers were paid in salt, thus our word salary.

Today, salt is readily available in many forms – and colors! We use it to bring out flavors, melt ice, soften water, or make it boil hotter. It can ease swelling or help rinse our sinuses. When we refer to someone as the “salt of the earth,” it’s a compliment.

On the other hand, salt can also have an edge: it can sting, as when you rub salt into a wound. If our food has no salt, it’s bland; if there’s too much, it’s inedible. If we don’t take in enough salt, we die. But if we take in too much, we also die. We are superstitious about spilling salt.

And then there’s that curious phrase, “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.” This seems to be an issue of translation rather than chemistry, because salt doesn’t lose its taste, or its saltiness. My friend Andrew McGowan points out that the Greek does not actually mean “loses its taste,” but “becomes stupid.” This curious phrase seems to reflect an Aramaic idiom, where stupid talk was deemed “saltless.”<sup>1</sup>

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Jesus says you are the salt of the earth. You are that presence which can soothe or irritate, melt or sting, preserve or ruin. For better or worse, you are the salt of the earth, and what you do with your saltiness matters a great deal. Whether you want to or not, whether you notice it or not, you make a spiritual impact in the world.

To be called salt is to be called precious. Really? How many little paper packets of salt are in your glove compartment or kitchen drawer? Imagine yourself in a world where salt is not a throw-away item. Then, look around you and see who else is listening to Jesus that day on the mount. He made a list: the poor, the mournful, the meek, the persecuted...*those* people, who are also not throw-away, but precious.

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<sup>1</sup> Ulrich Luz, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* 1.203, n.1.

Salt does its best work when it's scattered, when it's poured out, when it dissolves into what is around it. We put rice in saltshakers because it's frustrating when salt clumps together. Salt is meant to be sprinkled out, to give of itself. Salt doesn't exist to preserve itself; it exists to preserve what is *not* itself. It's meant to share itself to bring out the best in all that surrounds it.

Salt is meant to enhance, not dominate. Authentic, Christlike saltiness heals; it doesn't wound. It softens; it doesn't destroy. Salt *fails* when it dominates. Salt poured out without discretion leaves a burnt, bitter sensation in its wake. Too much salt ruins a meal; too much salt destroys a field.

Sadly, in our own day, much of what claims to be public religiosity, especially public Christianity, seems to delight in pouring salt into wounds; in using words to burn, not heal. The torrent of strident speech and hateful memes from the MAGA-verse, or from gaslighting officials in our own government, or in constant mendacity from the White House briefing room, and especially in the filth spewed from the President's own social media account – all of this speech is exactly what that Aramaic idiom described: saltless and stupid. And destructive.

This is not what Jesus intended when he called you the salt of the earth. Our preciousness in God's eyes was never meant to make us proud and self-righteous; it was meant to humble us and fill us with awe both of God and all our fellow humans.

By way of contrast, you may have watched the opening ceremonies of the Winter Olympics. It was inspiring to hear Kirsty Coventry, the chair of the International Olympic Committee, sound a clear, and salty, call for unity, peace, and togetherness, with the wish that the God-given talents of the world's athletes might spark hope, ignite joy, and light the way for all of us.

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If you grew up thinking that religion is about trying to earn divine favor, believing that your piety might someday make you precious in God's eyes, this symbol of salt should stop you in your tracks, if not bring you to your knees. Jesus names a commodity that was priceless. And, in calling us salt, he confers great value on all those that the world says have no value at all. God is still doing this. For us. Now.

How might we respond? Our vocation, our calling, is not to lose our saltiness. Not to hunker down, not to retreat from the world, not to choose blandness instead of boldness, not to burn others with our bitterness. Not to keep our love for Jesus an embarrassed secret. That sort of salt, Jesus tells us, is useless.

At its best, at our best, salt sustains and enriches the life of those around us. It pours itself out with abandon so that God's kingdom might be known on the earth as a domain of zest and life, a realm of health and wholeness.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reminds us again that this kingdom work, this work of love and justice, is real and tangible, and ours. In the words of Isaiah, that work is to "loose the bonds of injustice ... to let the oppressed go free ... to break every yoke."

It's not enough simply to believe. To be blessed, to be salt, to be followers of Jesus, is to take seriously, and lean into, who he calls you to be. "Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly."

My dear friends in Christ, you are the salt of the earth. May your pouring-out be for the life of the world. Amen.