

February 6, 2011

“Trusting the Invisible”

Rev. J. Daniel Lewis

Trusting the Invisible

Matthew 5:13-16, 20

5th Sunday after the Epiphany Year A

Sermon by J. Daniel Lewis
February 6, 2011, Claremont UMC

When Isaiah said, “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light,” this was not a reference to Punxsutawney Phil and the annual Ground Hog day rituals where Phil, the ground hog, was lifted out of darkness to look for his shadow. If you missed the pre-game this week, Phil did NOT see his shadow – meaning that an early spring is due.

Interestingly though, I read that there were at least 14 other famous groundhogs who agreed completely with Phil’s prediction; 10 that distinctly predicted otherwise – and 1 that never saw the light of day on Wednesday because of a snow blizzard. Is THIS what you come to church for? No, you come to worship to hear the GOOD news, not the ANNUAL news.

Try this - YOU ARE THE SALT OF THE EARTH! You are salty – saltiness; both preserving – and stinging; You are salty – both light flavor to season – and the cutting, bitter taste that offends. Your salt of yesterday and your salt of tomorrow are of less importance than the fact that you recognize your ‘salt of the earthiness’ now - unrefined, unpackaged, unlabeled, and unapproved by the FDA.

YOU ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD! You shine like a lamp, or a beacon; a 10-thousand watt bulb. Not that you weren’t a flashlight yesterday, or won’t be a laser beam tomorrow; You are light of the world now – lights that are on - light that illumines and reveals – light, both ambient and focused– light that cannot be hidden – light that should not shine half-heartedly.

Jesus used these images to jump the disciples into the present moment. As we hear them, we cast out the images of what we were; and we not worry over images of ourselves that have not come to pass. Like the disciples, we are shocked into the present – claiming what it is for each of us to be salt; for each of us to be illuminating; for each of us to be as God sees us, and calls, here and now.

In the gospel of John, Jesus also told his disciples: “I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?” (John 3:11) I hear his words like this: “Hey disciples, when are you going to trust that you have intrinsic value, as you are; claimed by God in this moment because you are NOT like everyone else. Don’t wait until YOU think you are prepared. The gift is for here; the gift is for now! SEE IT! CLAIM IT!”

Likely, WE the disciples also have our moments of doubt, when we look at our reflections and say, I want to burrow into a hole, or hide under a bushel.

If we feel unprepared for being God’s salt and light, hear these words again from Paul, who himself was once turned around by a great light. He writes these words to the church in Corinth: “When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God in polished words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ. Instead, I came to you in weakness, fear, and trembling – in an unrehearsed condition. My proclamations were not with plausible words of wisdom, but they were words of the Spirit, so that you might put more trust in the power of God, than on the wisdom of humans.” What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, the things from God that will be revealed through the spirit.”

Carol Moseley-Braun, a contemporary leader in law and politics, was the first African-American woman to be elected to the US Senate and in 2003 had campaigned as an early candidate for

presidential nomination. I find THESE words of hers directly applicable: "Defining myself, as opposed to being defined by others, is one of the most difficult challenges I face."

Whether refined, or not, we may each acknowledge that we have characteristics making us unique and recognizable to others. As individuals, we are known through our peculiar traits. Most of us are even loved by others because of our uniqueness. God is not calling for cloned Christians. God seeks people who will share THEIR stories, complete with Salt and/or Light.

As a church in 2011, the congregation known as the Claremont United Methodists also has a distinct identity, shaped over time by its members and leaders, yet also salty and illuminating today, because of the quirky people who sit in the pews this morning. Yes, God blesses you because you are Salt, and Light, and Quirky!

Just as the disciples are told to be cities of light, bright and shining on a hill. A church can be a bright and shining beacon on a hill lighting the surrounding community - providing a stable beam like a light-house provides safe navigation.

And as the disciples were told that they were salt of the earth and lights of the world, the congregation may also imagine itself as unique in character, distinct in flavor - illuminating the world around it.

Many of you would agree that Claremont UMC has some unique characteristics (dare I include some unique characters) which distinguish it from all other churches. We are busy with valuable ministries – that care for our own, that care for those who knock on our doors, and that care for others we only know through compassion and from a distance. As with many of the followers of God who have gone before us, we are granted the words and means for ministry by trusting in the nuance of inspiration; the invisible nudging of the Spirit; the advocating God who affirms us, encourages us, and directs us.

However, what is the cost of us resting on the comfort of invisible inspiration when our Salt and Light could also be offering distinct seasoning and vision for the rest of the world? WE ARE the visible, for the God of inspiration! We, together, can be the beacon of light, the church on the hill. We identify ourselves as Claremont United Methodist Church, but that's just a town name and a denomination. What is OUR salt? And what is OUR light? What is present right here and right now, that God is waiting for us to recognize? I don't have a single answer to give you.

There's a line I've coined for the Wednesday night service that refers to our invitation to diversity: "Whoever you are, be YOU while you're here." The world isn't always friendly to those who stand high to say, "I am." or even toward those who say, "Here, I am." One of the reasons I am at this church is because of a glimmer of light from this place that told me, "Whoever you are, be YOU while you're here."

There are so many amazing stories of people from our nation's history:

- In the African-American liberation – Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. Rosa Parks decided one day to say, "I am. And, I am here."
- In Women's liberation, people like Carol Moseley Braun and Sharon Rhodes-Wickett had to say many times, "I am. I am here."
- In Gay liberation, Harvey Milk, Elen DeGeneres, Chris Colfer and many others continue to say, "I am. I am here."
- When the history books discuss the events in Egypt in the year 2011, I am certain that we will learn personal stories of people who said before others, "I am. I am here."
- In the human liberation movement, many people like ourselves heed the calling of God to declare, "I am. I am here."
- Whoever you are – wherever and whenever – be you – inspired by the Spirit of God.

As we are called today to claim our individual and communal identities of Salt and Light, consider this morning, what tomorrow could be, if we take to heart what it means to be a beacon of light, a church and people on the hill that cannot be hidden.

May the "Salt" be with you!