

I had the good fortune to grab a quick out-of-town adventure this past week. The stated reason for the trip was to drive over to Phoenix so that I could help to celebrate the 90<sup>th</sup> birthday of my last remaining uncle. And while the time with family there was wonderful, an equally wonderful part of the excursion was the chance to spend some real quality time alone with Sylvia in the car as we had uninterrupted hours together watching the world pass by. And the highlight of the drive certainly had to be the half-day both going and coming we got to spend at Joshua Tree National Park several hours east of Los Angeles. For those of you who have never visited Joshua Tree, it comprises some 800,000 acres of land straddling both the Sonoran and Mojave Deserts.

Some people find the desert to be a harsh and unforgiving landscape. Especially in a drought year such as this one, the desert can seem like a lonely and barren place, with little evidence of the kinds of life you'd find at the ocean, or in the forests or mountains, or in an urban area. But any time of year, I find the desert to be a place of almost unimaginable beauty... maybe because it is sometimes a little harder to see, and maybe because those who call the desert "home" (whether they be plants, or animals, or the landscape itself) do so because they have found a way to adapt themselves to living simply, and those simple lifestyles brings out a beauty all their own. There is something about spending time on the desert which seems to strip away life to its bare essentials. And while there are lots of "what I want" issues and items in my life, time on the desert reminds me that focusing on the "what I need" issues and items in my life allow me to remain clearer about

what's really important. And I am quickly reminded that there is a considerable difference between what I "want" and what I truly "need."

One of the other observations I made out at Joshua Tree this past week was how much that landscape is really quite similar to so much of the Palestinian countryside which would have been the world of Jesus and his disciples so many years ago. And so as I thought about preaching this morning, I found myself trying to listen to Jesus' words, especially those found in this morning's gospel lesson, not with my own privileged 21<sup>st</sup> century Americanized ears, but rather to try to put myself into that other world – that world of 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine – and allow Jesus' words to speak from a very different time and place. Perhaps most provocatively, I had to ask myself not what I "wanted" to hear, but what I "needed" to hear... what Jesus really intended to say, when he spoke to his disciples with the words: "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world."

Salt and light were both images which carried a much different meaning than the way in which we consider them today. For most of us, salt is the stuff on the table in the restaurant which the doctor warns us to stay away from. But for those early listeners, salt meant quite a different thing. In the time and culture of Jesus, salt held a special significance. The Old Testament is filled with stories which revolve around the use of salt. Salt was strewn on sacrifices to be burnt at the altar. It was rubbed on newborn infants to ward off evil spirits. Elisha purified the springs of Jericho with salt to keep away sickness and death. Agreements and covenants were settled when both parties sat together and ate salted food. Cakes of salt were even used as money in various parts of the Middle East. Salt wasn't just a "want". It was a "need."

So, when Jesus' listeners heard him refer to them as the salt of the earth, it meant so much more than just a round blue cardboard box with a picture of a girl holding an umbrella on the label. It meant that they were incredibly valuable, that they were blessed with the ability to bring health and restoration, that they symbolized the covenant between God and the people. They were of utmost value both to God and to the people around them. They were, in every way, the salt of the earth.

Much the same held true when he spoke to them as being the light of the world. Again, light was not something available to them as it is today with the flip of a switch. Like salt, light was not just a luxury, but an absolute necessity for life. Travel, commerce, recreation – all of these took place during the day, when there was the safety of light. The story of creation says that God's first activity was separating the light from the darkness, and the opening lines of John's gospel speak of Jesus as the light that was coming into the world. The light of a campfire in the hills of Palestine meant safety and security from the bandits and wild animals which claimed the darkness as their own. Jesus' listeners knew how important light was to them, how its absence meant fear and separation, and how its presence meant goodness and wholeness and the presence of God. In John's gospel, Jesus refers to himself as the light of the world. Here in Matthew's gospel, he refers to those around him as the light of the world. They now represent that goodness, that wholeness, that presence of God in the world around them.

I think it's also important to note that Jesus doesn't tell his disciples that "You have the salt of the earth, or that you have the light of the world." First, he tells them, "You are the salt." It is not simply something you hold in your hand, and which you can choose to use – or not to use – at your discretion. And if you

lose your saltiness, you lose your reason for being. And then he says, “You are the light.” If you choose not to let that light shine, you are not simply refusing to use one of your gifts... you are denying a part of who you are as a person.

And so, with Jesus’ blessing comes Jesus’ command as well. You are the salt of the earth, so go and season the lives of those around you. You are the light of the world, so go and shine that light so that others might see the path to follow. Those are the responsibilities which accompany the blessings I have given you.

I can name – as I am sure you can as well – people who have been for me the salt of the earth and the light of the world. One of them was my grandfather. He came to live in our home in 1960, when I was three years old; a year after my grandmother had died. And he remained with us for the next 15 years, until 1975, the year that he died. So, all of my growing-up years, he was a part of our day-to-day family. For years I shared a bedroom with him. He was my companion, my teacher, my confidante... in some ways as much a father to me as was my own father. He had a sort-of down-home common sense about him, which came about not as a result of years of formal education or fancy upbringing, but out of his experience of growing up in Montana at the turn of the last century, of working in a lumber yard, of raising a family, of burying both his wife and his younger son, of struggling to grow old in a world which didn’t seem to have much room or time for old people. As do lots of people, I suppose, I look back on those years, and feel as though I never did tell him how much he meant to me, how much he taught me about life and living, how much he showed me about the dignity of growing old and aging with grace. And yet, of all the people I know, it was my grandpa who most embodied the phrase, “He was the salt of the earth.”

The other person who comes to my mind is a woman named Violet Laity. She was the organist/choir director at the Episcopal Church I grew up in. In fact, she served in that position for over 50 years. And every summer for her two-week vacation, she would take the train to Salt Lake City so that she could study the organ and take more lessons. But both music and the church were such an integral part of her life that, even during her vacation, she would take the train back to Butte on Saturday afternoon, play in church on Sunday morning, and then get back on the train to Salt Lake on Sunday afternoon to continue her studies. For Miss Laity, music and the church were her life, and her love of both of them shined through so clearly that one could not help but love them as well – just because she did so much. She was the light of the world, who let her light so shine before others that we saw her good works and glorified her Father who was in heaven.

Indeed, I believe that Jesus speaks just as compellingly today to those of us who will listen as he did to those who listened to him on that hillside so many years ago... a hillside which looked just like the hillsides in Joshua Tree National Park. He doesn't speak only to the rich or the powerful, to the famous or the popular. He speaks to people like my grandfather and Violet Laity. He speaks to people like you and me. Just as clearly as he did so long ago, Jesus says, “\_\_\_\_\_, you are the salt of the earth.” “\_\_\_\_\_, you are the light of the world.” That is God's blessing on us. That is also God's commandment. Go, and spread your salt around. Go, and light the way for others.

When you think about salt and light, their real value rests in how they affect other things. Salt has some value by itself, but its real importance comes in the way in which we use it to flavor our food, to preserve meats, or to soak our feet after a long, hard day. Light is good, but its real value comes in the way in which

it allows us to see the colors and shapes and beauty which surrounds us. When Jesus calls us to be salt and light, he does so not simply for our own benefit, but for the benefit of those around us. Salt and light do their greatest good when they are combined with other elements. They are the very stuff of life. So, too, in the Christian life, being salt and light is not simply something we can do when we feel like it, when it fits our mood, when it serves our own interests. Being salt and light lies at the core of what it means to live as Christians, to live within a community of faith, to be those provocative catalysts which bring about meaningful change in our own lives and in the lives of those around us.

The issue which lies before us, then, is not that which William Shakespeare once so eloquently posed in the words of his character, Hamlet: “To be, or not to be... that is the question.” We already know that we are... salt and light. The real questions, then, are: “To salt, or not to salt.” “To shine, or not to shine.” You know the questions. So go... and be the answers.

Amen.