

**SERMON – Matthew 5: 13-20 – 5th Sunday after Epiphany – February 5, 2023 –
Emmanuel Lutheran, Lancaster, PA – Rev. Timothy W. Sadler, Pastor**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

We're now in the fifth Sunday after the Epiphany. Epiphany means revelation of God: God brings something into being in our world that is special, out-of-the ordinary, and it teaches us something about God.

When the Wise Men from the East followed the star and knelt and worshipped baby Jesus, THAT was special. That was a revelation to the world that said something about who Jesus is.

There are other epiphanies in the Bible, such as when Jesus became transfigured – transformed – on the mountain. But when we speak of “The Epiphany” we mean that time when the kings followed the star to the Christ child.

In the Sunday's following The Epiphany, we read lessons from the Gospel that tell us about Jesus: about his baptism, about John the Baptist setting the stage, about the beginnings of Jesus' ministry. Then abruptly, the lessons shift. The focus is no longer comfortably on Christ, but on us.

In the gospel lesson Jesus tells us that unless our righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the Pharisees, we're in trouble. Now, this might not make us squirm too badly---because we spend a lot of time pointing out what the Pharisees did wrong. Surely, we think, we can do better than that.

But we can't dismiss the Pharisees so quickly. Their religious and ethical practices were some of the most disciplined the world has ever known. But Jesus did have a problem with them...

We know that from Scripture; the Pharisees had gotten discipleship all mixed up. They'd come to believe that being righteous meant you only had to avoid evil, and that belief turned them inward, so they tended to focus only on themselves.

Following Christ has never been about just avoiding evil. That's stating discipleship in negative terms, and it tends to let us off the hook rather easily. As long as we don't do this or don't do that, we're okay.

Following Christ certainly means in part that we try to avoid evil, but even more so, it means we live with the desire to do good.

Notice Jesus didn't say "you should try to be salt, and you should try to be light." It's not a matter of avoiding evil; it's a matter of being the kind of person who is willing to serve as the light and love of God in the world.

We want to look at Jesus and say, "Are you serious?" We have our own problems and struggles, our own limitations and doubts. How can we possibly be salt and light?

Think a minute about those tiny, little grains of salt. So small, and yet so necessary. By itself, salt isn't significant—I mean, we don't usually eat just salt. But it's necessary for what it makes happen—it brings the flavor of food to life. Just ask anyone

who's on a no salt diet. And this weather is also a reminder that we use salt, so we don't lose our footing.

We disciples of Christ, feeling so small and insignificant at times: but sprinkle a few of us around this world and there's no telling what we'll stir up, what we'll flavor. Without us...this world would be boring and flat.

And light? Well, that's important too. It's important in the same way salt is, for what it makes happen. Just like we normally don't eat salt by itself, we don't usually stare at a lightbulb.

But light's important because it enables us to see. You can be in a totally dark room and turn on one little light bulb, and the whole darkness is transformed. It may not be blinding light...but it's enough to get your direction. And in a crazy world like ours, that may be all the light that's needed.

We don't have to shine so brightly we amaze the world and impress ourselves. We just need to lighten the darkness enough so people can find their way. Without the people of God, the world can't see what it is. Until it meets someone who is the light, the world has no way of understanding how dark and sick it has become.

It only takes a little sprinkle of salt to show us how tasteless our food has been. It only takes one small candle to show that there's something in this world other than the darkness.

You are the salt, and you are the light. Salt and light aren't what you're trying to be: salt and light are who you are. You who bear the name of Christ are promised that he's already...made you salt and light.

Our purpose in life isn't simply to avoid evil, but to actively live out the love and grace of Jesus Christ.

And because we are the salt of this world, people will praise God.

And because we are light the darkness, we point the way to Christ.

Without the salt of Christ, the world can't be jolted out of its indifference. Hide our light under a basket, and everybody stumbles.

I have said many times during my ministry:

While we are here on earth, God is still at work in us and through us. I believe this because when our work here is completed, we go home to God. But until that happens we've got to believe that there's a reason a purpose we're still here.

If we don't believe that, life will be a lot harder to bear. We'll see it more as an endurance contest, something we have to get through but not really serving any purpose.

But I believe that while we still draw breath, God is working through each one of us to touch the lives of others in some way.

We've all been brought together in this community at this particular time in our lives. There is tremendous purpose in that.

Salt and light. For whatever reason, we need these... surroundings to live out our purpose.

And when we're feeling small and weak, like our flame isn't very bright or our salt isn't very salty, just remember: God has a way of making a little go a long, long way.

Thanks be to God. Amen.