

The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Readings

Isaiah 58:1-9a

I Corinthians 2:1-12

Matthew 5:13-20

Psalm 112

Collect

Set us free, O God, from the bondage of our sins, and give us the liberty of that abundant life which you have made known to us in your Son our Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

† In the name of the One who loves us

Some Sundays arrive with floodlights. Like the ones that used to be in front of a Broadway show on opening night but now are at a Walmart opening. But those aren't the lights I want you to think of.

Think more of the light that arrives like a porch light.

Not dramatic, just steady.

If you've ever tried to find your keys in the dark, a working porch light can save a whole evening.

Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth... you are the light of the world."

And Isaiah says, in essence, "Yes, and here's what that looks like with some skin on the ball.

Loosen the bonds of injustice.

Undo the thongs of the yoke.

Share bread.

Bring the homeless poor into *your* house.

Cover the naked.

Stop pointing fingers.

Stop speaking evil.

Then, Isaiah says, your light will break forth like the dawn.

So the Bible hands us two images that are almost comically ordinary: salt and light.

Not incense and unicorns. (Sorry, Matt. Sorry, Mike)

Salt and light.

Which is good news, because most of our days are made of ordinary things:

emails, errands, bodies that creak, families we love and worry about, headlines that make you whisper, "Lord have mercy," before you've even had coffee.

Salt is not a spice
Spices sit on the surface.
Salt tends to create an isotopic pull that draws water and water-loving fats and aromatics out of food. (Aren't you glad you asked?)
Salt changes what it seasons.

Light is not an opinion.
Light is visibility.
It helps people find their way without stubbing a toe.

And in Isaiah, God is not impressed by loud religion that doesn't relieve anybody.
The prophet is basically saying: "If your faith is only a performance, your 'light' is just stage lighting."
Pretty, maybe.
But it doesn't warm anyone.
It doesn't keep that toe safe.

Then Matthew adds a twist: Jesus says he has not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it.
Which means this is not a choice between "law" and "love," like they're rival sports teams.
Fulfillment means the point of the law is revealed, and the point is a life shaped like mercy.

And that's where today's Collect sneaks in like a quiet genius:
"Grant us the liberty of that abundant life which you have made known to us in your Son..."

Liberty.
Abundant life.
Not permission to do whatever we want.
Not a spiritual "get out of jail free" card.
But liberty from the small, cramped life where we protect our comfort and call it prudence.
Liberty from the brittle life where we measure holiness by rule-keeping while other people are hungry.
Liberty from the anxious life where we hoard light like it's going out of style.

And that's where Isaiah gets very practical.
He mixes his metaphors, but he gets it.
If you want to shine, he says, start untying knots.
Loosen what's choking people.
Feed.
Welcome.
Clothe.
Stop the little daily violences: the finger-pointing, the slander, the easy contempt.

Because it turns out you don't have to "invent" light.
You just must stop blocking it.

Now, since we are Episcopalians, we should admit something with affection: we are not, as a people, big on being told what to do.

If you want an Episcopalian to do something, the best method is:

suggest it politely,

change the subject

serve coffee,

(Coffee that at Christ Church Pompton is quite tasty and enslaved no one in its production.

Oh. And make sure there's a committee. Of laypeople.

And honestly, that's not all bad.

Because coerced goodness isn't goodness.

You can't bully someone into abundant life.

You can't legislate joy.

You can't nag a soul into holiness.

But we do sometimes use our spiritual independence and intellectual assurance as a kind of holy invisibility cloak:

"Well, no one can tell me what to believe," we say,

while the Gospel is standing right there saying, "Well, yes . . . and will you feed somebody?"

So here's the invitation that fits both Isaiah and Jesus, and keeps the porch light on:

This week, choose one small act that makes one real person's life more livable.

Make it concrete.

Make it doable.

Make it the kind of thing that actually touches the world:

a meal, a call, a ride, a check-in, a repair, a welcome, an apology, a generous assumption, a defended person, a shared table.

Not because God loves you more when you do. (God **could not** love you any more than she does now.)

But because this is what liberty looks like.

This is what abundant life tastes like.

This is what salt does.

This is what light is for.

And when we live that way, not perfectly, not noisily, but honestly, Isaiah's promise stops being poetry and starts being prognosis:

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn.

Not a spotlight.

The Dawn.

The kind that comes gradually, faithfully, and somehow changes the whole street while you weren't looking.

So let's ask for that liberty.

And then, in the gentle, stubborn way our tradition does best, let's practice it.

One pinch of salt.

One porch light.

One loosed knot at a time.