

February 5, 2017
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Matthew 5:13-20

The Light of the World

I listened to a message left on the church answering machine earlier this week, a message from someone I don't know. "Hello," the voice said into the recording, "I'm not quite sure how to say this, but I feel like there's evil shadows in the air..."

I'd consider this a random inquiry by someone who might need professional help, except that it encapsulates what I've been hearing from a lot of people these past few weeks, conversations I've had in which people feel overworked or overwhelmed, or who've experienced loss: loss of something important to them, loss of someone close to them; loss of energy, or ideas; loss of a sense of what is going on in our country. It seems to me that a lot of people, and I include myself here, a lot of people feel under a shroud, feel a sense of mourning, and unmooring, on any number of levels. It seems it's been felt especially this past January, and the weather didn't help. How many days of sunlight did we have last month? *5 maybe 6*, the cloudiest spell in over 25 years, they said. It was notable enough to make the news, to be something people were talking about when they weren't talking about all those other things.

There really have been shadows in the air. And we all need professional help. (I'm pretty sure we all need professional help.) This is what we all say together, at the beginning of worship, when we begin worship with the rite of Confession and Forgiveness: "It's been dark, Lord. I'm in the dark. I feel the shadows, outside and inside. I need your help."

At the beginning of January, the Confirmation students and I watched a short video that a member of the congregation shared with me. There was never any dialogue in the video, just lots of different scenes, none of them lasting more than a few seconds. We watched it just after Christmas, because it was a Christmas video, or at least it began that way. There was soft music in the background and then there were images of people in modern dress doing Christmassy things, and there shots of Christmas decorations, stars, like that star we have there, and lights, all kinds of images of light, and then a little girl looking at small nativity set.

Then the video cut to a scene of woman and a man wearing robes, they looked Middle Eastern, and they were in a barn with a baby, it was a scene of the first Christmas. Then the video moved to a young Jesus, and then an adult Jesus, who was leaning over a man who was lying down on a cot, Jesus lifted him up. And then the video shifted to a modern scene, a man being lifted up out of a hospital bed by a nurse. The video returned to Bible times, Jesus was now breaking apart loaves of bread and handing it to a great crowd of people. And then the video cut to a modern scene, set in a soup kitchen. Then a scene of Jesus speaking, motioning with his hands, people listening. And then there was a modern scene in a classroom, with a teacher. Then Jesus smiling and raising up a child; a modern scene, an adult raising up a child. Jesus, getting a hug from a man who looked both desperate and overjoyed; a scene in a police station, a man being hugged with relief by teenager.

There were yet more paired scenes. Always first a recognizable Bible story of Jesus doing all these different things. And then a modern scene, and these had all different settings, in different countries, people of different races and ages, men and women, all echoing the gestures of Jesus in the scene just before.

And then the screen went dark, and there was one sentence, shining out from it: “I am the light of the world.” Jesus said that, in the gospel of John. We sang it today as part of the gospel acclamation. “Jesus said, ‘I am the light of the world.’” Jesus says it in the gospel of John, the gospel that says that in the beginning there was God, and in him was life, and the life that is the light of all people. That gospel that says that the light shines in the darkness, the true light that enlightens everyone, coming into the world, and then introduces Jesus, who himself announces just a few chapters later, “I am the light of the world.” Just like it said on the screen at the end of that video I was describing.

And then there was another sentence on video screen, after “I am the light of the world,” it said, “We are the light of the world.” Jesus says that too. Jesus says it in the gospel of Matthew, in the part we heard today, in today’s reading from the Sermon on the Mount, this foundational presentation of discipleship, this description of what it means to be a follower of Jesus, what it entails, what it asks of us, what it makes of us. Jesus says in that we are the light of the world. But he says it yet more directly, Jesus says: “You are the light of the world.”

You. The light of the world that came into the world has come for and into you. It shines in you. It shines through you.

Or, it can, if you don’t hide it under a bushel basket. Surely that one of the more strangely memorable Bible verses. Why a bushel basket? Why put a bushel basket over a light?! Surely the first listeners found that puzzling, too, which of course is the point. Why would you ever put a light under a bushel basket? But we do. We hide the light of Christ—and under strange covers. We hide it, and squander it, and we’re in darkness, and it’s only February, and there are many more grey days to come.

“Whoever follows me will have the light of life,” Jesus says. “Let your light shine.” Let it shine by taking lifting someone up. Let it shine by breaking bread, by sharing food with someone, by sharing food with someone who is hungry. Let it shine by teaching; by raising children; by holding close someone in distress. All of these and many more the gestures of Jesus, gestures simple and profound.

Let it shine, as Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount. People hear that sermon by watching us. What we do maybe the only sermon some people ever hear, the only Bible they ever read. Let your light so shine, that they may see your good works, and give God glory.