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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
2/5/2017, The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
Isaiah 58:1-12, Matthew 5:13-20

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text is from our Gospel Lesson. It speaks of a lampstand. Jesus says this:

¹⁴You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. (Matthew 5:14-15, NRSV)

Picture a typical ancient Palestinian house “that has only a window or two, or perhaps none. A lamp is needed. In order to provide maximum light, it would be put on a shelf fairly high on the wall or on some other kind of stand.”¹ We modern folk have lots of light, even in the nighttime, but for ancient people, candlelight was precious. Without some light in the evening, it would be hard for people to knit and mend things, for example. It would hard to read. Many of the day’s labors would have to come to an end. Even if strength were sufficient and need for the labor pressing, still without light, much good work grinds to a halt. People are at a real disadvantage without some light, for there is darkness out there.

Jesus says, “You are the light of the world!” Imagine that! We might say of some charming people they “light up the room.” We mean is that some people bring life and joy to others, just by their joyful and upbeat presence. Other people gravitate to someone like that – we like to be in their company – they lift our spirits – we feel good when they are around.

But I think Jesus is talking about something much deeper than that. To be a source of light in a world full of darkness involves more than cheering people up. The light Jesus wants us to be is the kind of light that helps people see their way through the darkness – to find meaning and purpose in a life that often seems too random and senseless.²

On this old earth of ours, there is a lot of darkness out there! There is both physical and moral darkness. The sun sets, and darkness comes. In many ways, that is alright. It signals a time for the creatures of the woods and the people of the cities and countryside to get some rest. But that *other* darkness

¹ *The Lectionary Commentary: The Third Readings* (William B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2001), Ronald J. Allen on Matthew 5.

² These last two fine paragraphs come from my wife Caro’s sermon for this morning.

is not good. There is too much moral darkness in our world. In the beginning, God said, "Let there be light," but in the conduct of our lives, we are capable of letting light go and drifting toward the dark side.

This is no small thing of which we speak. In the privacy of their homes or apartments, there are frail people being brutalized by stronger people. Children flinch, wives recoil or husbands cringe when the drunken spouse comes home. They are victims of the darkness of soul that dwells in the stronger one.

In the cover of the nighttime, women sell their bodies, men sell their bodies, drugs are sold – the customers too succumbing to darkness of soul.

In broad daylight, in the corridors of both political and financial power, dark schemes are sometimes thought out and put into action. Shabby investments are recommended, cruel laws are written. It is done by well-paid people in lovely suits, yet it is all too shady. *Law* permits it, but *love* does not.

In the wee hours, when many of us are sleeping, there are people who cannot sleep. They lie in bed and brood, or they sit on the sofa, stare off into space, and see little good in the world, little reason for hope. They are threatened by despair. It is not so much moral darkness that besets them, but spiritual darkness. Things have conspired against them, leaving them to wonder whether they can go on, and too few of their neighbors even try to speak an encouraging word to them. They are becoming engulfed by darkness, encompassed round about by despair.

"You are the light of the world," Jesus says. You are light in a world that needs some light. So shine on!

That is the theme of this sermon. Shine on! If you belong to Jesus, you have some light to share, so shine on.

But, first things first. Before I turn again to my theme about shining on, let us now speak of that greater Light. Let us speak of Jesus. *He* is the light of the world, St. John says (John 1). If we can lend any illumination to a dark world, it will because we borrow our little portion of light from him. We are like moons. We are at our best when we are reflecting his sunshine. And we are at our lowest, when things get in the way -- when this world's pressures and pleasures and preoccupations eclipse our sight of Jesus. When we no longer look at the Light of this world, then we dim bit by bit and have less to contribute to a world that really needs some light. We cannot give what we do not have. If we drift away from Jesus, we will not have his light and his beauty to share with others.

Jesus is the Light of this world because he has walked his path and endured his passion all the way to the cross, and rose victorious over that cross.

In this morning's reading from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks of the *fulfillment* of the scriptures:

Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them. (Matthew 5:17, RSV)

At this past Monday evening's Bible Study, we concluded our study of St. Luke. Twice in that final chapter, Jesus says that in his life, death, and resurrection, "the scriptures have been fulfilled." He teaches this to the two disciples as they walk along toward the village of Emmaus. The hearts of these two were moved by the teaching of Jesus. Afterwards they recall this:

And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures? (Luke 24:32, KJV)

Shortly after this, Jesus suddenly appears in the midst of the eleven. Again, Jesus is firm about the point: in his passion and resurrection, the scriptures have been fulfilled:

Then he said to them, "These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled." (Luke 24:44, RSV)

Each of these sayings about Jesus fulfilling the law and the prophets is another way of saying what the Christmas angel said long ago:

¹⁰And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. ¹¹For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. (Luke 2:10-11, KJV)

That is, Jesus is our Saviour, and not we ourselves. Yet, we should save others as best we can. Jesus is the Light of the world, and not we ourselves. Yet we should serve as light for others as best we can. Jesus himself says so, "You are the light of the world... let your light shine."

Why not? If we have our Saviour, if eternity for us is safe with him, then is it not time for us to try to help others in this world? It borders on hardheartedness and self-deceit to place our confidence in Jesus, but not help our neighbors to have some confidence in him too.

You remember the Sunday School song. I bet many of you do:

This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

The song seems to come straight out of our Gospel Lesson:

Hide it under a bushel, no!
I'm gonna let it shine.
Hide it under a bushel, no!
I'm gonna let it shine, Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

The prophet Isaiah would approve of the last verse. Even more important, our Lord Jesus likes it too:

Let it shine over the whole wide world,
I'm gonna let it shine.
Let it shine over the whole wide world,
I'm gonna let it shine, let it shine, let it shine, let it shine...

You have light to give. You can be a candle shining out against moral and spiritual darkness. Don't let Satan blow you out! Don't let the devil dim you. Let us understand with renewed earnestness that Jesus loves all the children of this world. He loves all of humanity. He does not want them to suffer darkness nor participate in it. And he is willing to use us as candles lit against the darkness that drags so many people down on this earth. Can we have any higher dignity than this: that our Saviour Jesus is willing to count us as candles of life and light in this world? In the coliseums of Rome and all the empires, where bodies are broken and people laugh... in the amphitheatres of life where wickedness reigns and hearts become as hard as stone... in the homes and villages where no one suspects that darkness is descending, let our light so shine before others that they will see our good deeds and give glory to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.