

When the Light Gets Low

Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 5:13-20

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, (Feb. 9) 2020

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Ring the bells that still can ring

Forget your perfect offering

There is a crack a crack in everything

That's how the light gets in.

- Leonard Cohen, "Anthem"

It's been a hard week and we are tired, discouraged, and nearly in despair. Here we are in Epiphany, the season of light, and "this little light of mine" is barely shining. The light is getting low.

I've got news for you. Did you know that most of the Bible was written when the light was getting low? The exile of the people of God to Babylonian captivity and domination was the most important influence upon most all of the Old Testament. Not only is most of it about either warnings about going into exile, or living in exile, or life just after exile, almost the entire Old Testament was written, gathered, put together during exile and right after. When the light got really low, the people of God started writing down all they remembered of what God had done and whom God had used. They figured out the hard way they had better remember what God had done in order to have hope for what God was going to do.

Our reading from Isaiah 58 in particular is about a time when the light was getting low. The people were just returning home from captivity in Babylon. But when they got home everything was gone, or in a pile of rubble, or changed forever. Everything they had remembered, everything they had counted on was gone and they were greatly discouraged and tired. They had no power to make things better. No influence with public officials. No chance of electing a king, no chance at electing anyone or making any political choices because they were dominated by the Babylonian Empire. And though the Babylonians had let them return to their land, Babylon still dominated everything. Their light was low.

So the people returned to church. Doves of them showed up and sang hymns and read the Bible and shouted and cried out to God. They fasted and observed all the special holy times like practicing Sabbath. They quit working on the Sabbath, no more meetings on the Sabbath, no more frenzied getting ready for the work week on the Sabbath. They really tried.

But still, the light got lower and lower. God was far from them it seemed. Their prayers were like shouting in an empty room. They plead to God, “We fast but you do not see. We humble ourselves but you do not notice” (58:3). And God says to them, “Look, you still think it is about you. In your fear and exhaustion you turn inward and think only of yourselves and people just like you. And when you think of me, you think I am a means to your ends. You think you can call me and I’m supposed to come running; that I’m here to answer your every whim. You say you want me but you only call me to make everything better for you. I mean you’re in this predicament because of your selfish, navel-gazing religion in the first place. Even on your fast days you end up arguing among yourselves. You oppress your workers, don’t pay just wages, finagle your way to not pay their health costs, lay

them off whenever there is profit to be made. You exploit them; cheat them, while giving yourselves big bonuses” (58:3-7).

“If you want to fast, then this is the kind of fast I want: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the yoke that holds people down, let the oppressed free. I want you to feed the hungry and serve the homeless, clothe the naked, and care for the afflicted. Quit pointing fingers, accusing, and blaming including blaming poor people for their own impoverishment. Instead, sit down with the hurting poor and listen and help them get a start in the right direction. Give proper shelter. Give a hand up” (58:6-9).

“If you do this amazing things will happen. Your light shall break forth and shine like the dawn. Healing shall come and I will be your vindicator walking before you and the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard – I’ll have your back. Then when you call, I will answer. You will cry for help and I will say, ‘Here I am.’” (58:8-9).

“Sit with the brokenhearted. Walk with them. Work alongside and listen. Practice compassion – which means to suffer alongside one another. Grieve, cry, and lament because your neighbor is hurting. When you learn to suffer alongside – the light is going to shine. You don’t have to be perfect. In fact, the way to hope is through the way of grief, compassion, and being honest about your despair and sense of failure as you share in the hurt and suffering of others.”

Ring the bells that still can ring

Forget your perfect offering

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That's how the light gets in.*

The Gospel reading this morning is from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-6-7. The Sermon on the Mount is the heart of Jesus' teaching and has been at the heart of Christian practice by the great saints of the faith for centuries. This is the heart of the matter for being Christian, for being the church. For example, in the early 13th century St. Francis of Assisi walked all over southern Europe and walked even to Egypt by the roundabout way of modern Turkey, Syria, and the Holy Land in the quest for peace. He had memorized the Sermon on the Mount and as he walked he would meditate and pray through portions of the Sermon. Jesus' Sermon shaped how Francis saw the world, how he interacted with others, and how he rooted his life in God.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer centered the life of his alternative seminary in Finckenwald, Germany in the Sermon on the Mount. The Nazi darkness had overwhelmed the regular church in Germany, and Bonhoeffer knew that to be faithful to Christ and to resist the Nazis would take small communities of faith rooted deeply in prayer and the Sermon on the Mount. If there was going to be any light at all in Germany it would be centered in this very Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew's church, who remembered Jesus' Sermon, was small and without power. They were a colony of heaven. Though they lived in the Roman Empire, they lived their lives, not according to Caesar, but according to Jesus and this Sermon on the Mount. And though they too were overpowered, overwhelmed, and overlooked, Jesus tells them and tells us, "You are the salt of the earth" (5:13) and "You are the light of the world" (5:14).

Jesus is reminding us that though small and overwhelmed and feeling like we have no influence or power to bring about changes in the wider society, we do have influence. We are called to be witnesses to the Way of Jesus. We act as salt and light in this world.

Jesus' Sermon reminds us that who we are and the witness that we are given is not contingent on having social and political power and influence as most of us usually think. Being a witness does not assume that we can make things come out the way we want them to. It does not mean we will see the results we want, especially in the short term. We walk into a completely dark room and we tend to think that we can flip a light switch and the entire room lights up. And when we can't get the entire room lit, no matter how hard we try and work and organize, we are tempted to give up and give in to despair and exhaustion. But being a witness is more like lighting one candle in the dark room. Our job is to be that one candle.

The same with being salt – a little salt goes a long way. Indeed, too much salt is a problem. The late Mennonite scholar Alan Kreider (old friend of Ron Yoder's), wrote a wonderful essay several years ago called, "On Salty Discipleship" in which he said that one of things modern interpreters of Jesus' call to be salt overlook is that in the ancient world, salt was also considered a fertilizer. In small amounts – in small amounts – salt nourished and stimulated growth, vitality, and newness especially in worn out soil. Too much salt kills but a little salt stimulates life (see *The Other Side*, March/April 1989, pp34-37).

There is a saying among our Mennonite cousins: trust the power of weakness and see through the weakness of power. In other words, there are some kinds of strength that come with being small and weak, while being powerful has

its own limitations. When we assume we have power and influence we think it is up to us to get results and to make things better. We assume that we know best. And if things are getting worse then we think we need to work harder, and organize more. If we could just get more salt, we think. We forget that too much salt overwhelms, even destroys.

Our job is not to get more salt. Our calling is to be salt where we are. A little salt makes a big difference. A little light can be seen in the darkness while too much light blinds. Both salt and light, in small doses, work in ways beyond our comprehension.

Are you listening to me Austin Heights?

*Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.*

In 1966, young Catholic peace activist Jim Forest was exhausted and in near despair over Vietnam and the arms race with the Russians. In desperation he wrote a letter to Thomas Merton, the Catholic monk and writer, who was part of a Trappist Monastery in Kentucky. In his letter, Forest said, “I feel like a man in Germany in the 1930’s trying to explain why Jews ought not to be sent to the concentration camps. It all seems so utterly clear... Yet no group seems more distant from these facts than Christian (and Catholic) Americans.”

Thomas Merton wrote back an extraordinary letter. The early part of the letter is one of understanding and empathy about Forest's exhaustion and despair. But then Merton says, "Do not depend on the hope of results." What you are doing is essentially "apostolic" or missionary work. "As you get used to this idea you start more and more to concentrate not on the results but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself... you struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people... it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything... As for the big results, these are not in your hands or mine, but they can suddenly happen, and we can share in them: but there is no point in building our lives" on them... The real hope, then, is not in something we think we can do, but in God who is making something good out of it in some way we cannot see" (Jim Forest, *The Root of War is Fear: Thomas Merton's Advice to Peacemakers*, pp. 192-196).

The Leonard Cohen song says, "Ring the bells that still can ring." In other words we do what we can. Then he says, "Forget your perfect offering." Quit worrying over results. Don't wait until you have all your ducks in a row. Ring the bell that you have. Be the salt and light that you are. Serve the needy, comfort the hurting. Be with those who suffer. There is a crack in everything, and everyone, and as we sit with, walk with, and listen we learn that each other's cracks, where we are broken, is the very place the light gets in. Our hope is in God who is making something good in ways we cannot see.

Stanley Hauerwas remembers hearing a lecture by a World Council of Churches official about the Russian Orthodox Church during the early years of Communism in the Soviet Union. Now there was no more conservative, traditional, and culturally accommodated to the rule of the czars than the Russian

Orthodox Church. Their mystical worship seemed totally disconnected from any kind of social engagement. Revolution was going on outside but inside their churches they just did their thing, oblivious to everything else.

But there was one Russian Orthodox habit and tradition that enabled the church to be the church. Before the Eucharist, the priest went out and stood on the church's front steps and rang a hand bell signaling to the village that the celebration of the Eucharist was beginning. The early Communist regime, in its anti-religion campaign, outlawed the public ringing of the bell. But the Orthodox priests, doggedly traditionalist, continued to stand on the porch ringing the bells. For them, there was no church without ringing of the bell. The state reacted by slaughtering, jailing, and torturing thousands of priests. But the priests persisted. They never gave up. They rang the bells that still could ring (Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Where Resident Aliens Live*, pp. 40-41).

Austin Heights we persist. We do not give up. We ring our little bells. We pray and love, show mercy, and be patient. We suffer alongside one another, feed the hungry and provide shelter, work for justice and peace, nurture and grow relationships. We are a little salt and a small light through which God is working in ways we cannot yet see.

I know we feel like everything is breaking down. But remember it also might mean that things are breaking open, too. There is a crack in everything... it is how the light gets in. But it is also how the light gets out.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.