

5th Sunday after Epiphany – 05 February 2017

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

Sometimes it seems very easy to slip into a rhythm: a rhythm of doing the same thing day after day, week after week, never veering far from the path of tried and true, finding comfort in knowing what the outcome of your efforts will be before you even start. This happens in our home lives and our work schedules. It happens in our worship and in our play. If it works, why fix it? Isn't that what they say?

But what happens when you hit that mid-life crisis, that 7-year itch, that stuck-in-a-rut time that seems to pop up out of the blue? All of a sudden, the rhythm of life no longer produces what it used to, or maybe it still does and that in itself becomes the problem. We are not robots trained to do the same thing, day in and day out, year after year. We are God-created beings given ingenuity, curiosity, creativity and even sometimes a sense of adventurousness. Whether we are dyed-in-the-wool traditionalists or cutting edge junkies, we all get to that point in our faith lives when God reminds us that there is more out there than what we see right before our eyes. (And just a warning for those of you who haven't come to that realization yet, it is coming! God does expect us to change and grow. For some it happens early in life, for others it happens later in life but rest assured, if you are paying attention to God, it will happen!)

I would like you to just take a second to look around you; look around the church... What do you see? What do you not see? When I look around, from my perch up here in the pulpit, I see a gathering of good and faithful people. I see the faces of people who care deeply for their loved ones. I see people who are at varying places on their faith journey. I see people who, for the most part, look pretty much the same – middle class people, (mostly retired or near retirement), who dress similarly, worship pretty closely to the ways others around you worship... We are a wonderful group of mostly like-minded people. And this is no surprise as this is pretty much how societies construct themselves.

Since we have so much in common, we also tend to do today what has always been done. If it ain't broke ...? Right? But I would like you to think now about what you don't see around you here today ... We don't have packed pews ... We don't have many representatives of those generations that are coming after us ... We don't have the homeless and the hungry, that we know of ... We don't have people who don't speak the language we do ... We don't really have folks who don't know what we're doing or what book we're using as we move through our liturgy ...

I mentioned earlier that sometimes we end up in a crisis, or even just a rut when the "same ol', same ol'" routine sets in. This is not anything new. The people of Isaiah's time experienced it and the people of Jesus' time were experiencing it as well. And during those two eras, God stepped in and said, "Guess what? I am going to shake things up!" In Isaiah's time, God broke

into their lives to say the way you worship me is going to change. He told them that he didn't want their sacrifices anymore. He didn't want the things they gave him that he didn't need. Instead he called them to do something new, not instead of, but along with, their worship. He told them that he wanted them to look around them to see what was there and what wasn't there. What was there were many, many peoples – different than they were, hungry, naked, scared, persecuted, homeless ...What wasn't there were the resources for these people to just 'help themselves'. Or at least that is how it appeared... When God's people listened to God's voice and looked through God's eyes, they began to realize that God was making *them* the resources to provide what wasn't there for all those who were there.

Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

While God was indeed calling His people out because they had become rather laissez-faire in their attitudes toward Him and their faith, He wasn't punishing them or turning His back on them. Rather, He was sharing with them the truth that they didn't yet comprehend: they were ready to take that next step – a step that would take them forever away from the old rhythm and routine; a step that would take them into a better time in their lives than they had ever known because they would not just be worshipping Him from 'down here' but working with Him right here, beside Him. God was calling his people to recognize that their salvation was not about comfort and routine in this life but instead, their salvation was about their next life. This life was all about helping others to understand and accept salvation as well. And the way God wanted Isaiah's compatriots to share this good news was through sharing what they had, and giving them a foretaste of heaven through their good works given freely and with joyous hearts on earth, in this life. After all, how will a tired, hungry, naked and homeless person understand that God's love will comfort him in eternity if he has no knowledge of comfort on earth?

In Jesus' time the same message held true. The people Jesus encountered had fallen into a rhythm and routine that worked well for them in their earthly lives but Jesus introduced to them the next step and that was one that called them to make that uncomfortable transition from the tried and true to the unknown and scary. No longer were they to do what they had always done, now *they* were to become salt and light.

So, what are salt and light? What was Jesus commanding his followers to become? Salt is a preservative. You add salt to meat to cure it and to ensure it lasts longer than it would if left to sit on its own. This wasn't an unknown image for the people of Jesus' time. In the warm, middle-eastern desert, salt was a product that was worth its weight in gold. Salt was an essential part of being able to be fed and sustained from season to season. And Jesus was calling his followers to become salt in their world.

By calling people to become salt, Jesus was demanding that believers would bring salvation to the people who were hungry and needed to be clothed and housed and helped.

Becoming salt meant that as his followers reached out to the unfortunate in their midst, they would begin the process of preserving them: they would be bringing them new and extended – eternal – life as their love and compassion and actions ‘salted’ the lives of those who needed to be saved. Jesus is the One who did the saving but it was Jesus’ followers who helped people to recognize that they had been salted – preserved – saved.

But he also called upon them to become light – not a light hidden in a room with the doors closed so only the insiders could see. He called them to be lights out in the world where everyone would be able to see. He wanted people to do their work of salting and sharing love – both in feelings and in actions – in ways that went beyond the space in which they traditionally gathered. Jesus called them out, into the world, and we are now, like them, being called to go out, into the world, to reach all those who we do not see when we look around this space.

When we think about what this reaching out looks like, and how it will affect us and the church, my hunch is that God will not simply show His appreciation for our actions and love by filling our pews up. As a matter of fact, we might be led to understand that the “church” as the Body of Christ we are called to be a part of, may never look like the full building with stained glass windows and numerous study and social groups it once did. It is quite possible that God is calling us, like he did through Isaiah and through Jesus, to a brand-new way of being that looks completely unfamiliar and will probably be uncomfortable and even scary at times. But what it will be, is blessed by God’s love, encouraged and strengthened by the Holy Spirit and a way for all those who are hungry, scared, naked, homeless and even hopeless to come to share in the Good News of eternal life in Jesus Christ.

Now, you might be thinking that this is where Reverend Rachael is going to drop the hammer and say that as of our AGM at the end of the month this is what is going to change ... I am going to do no such thing. This is your call. I am your priest; your sacramentalist; your liturgist; your preacher; your teacher; your intercessor ... I am also your sister in Christ and I will walk beside you as we move into whatever this new era of Church may look like that God is calling us to share. I will become salt and light with you. However, this is not a Movement that I can pronounce and then determine how it will unfold. This is your work, as well as mine. God is calling *you* to be salt and light. God is calling you to leave this place to help preserve and save the helpless, the homeless, the hopeless ...

God has given all of us the call and expectation that we will participate in the Jesus Movement to get out into the world to be the hands and feet of Christ. Now the time has come for you to decide how do we, as the Body of Christ at St. James, Armdale participate in this Movement. The next step is yours ... What is your will? How will we respond to God’s call upon us? How will you and I together become salt and light in a world in which the same ol’, same ol’, just no longer suffices?