

## Scripture Readings for Sunday February 9<sup>th</sup> 2020

### Exodus 19:16-25 (NIV)

<sup>16</sup>On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. <sup>17</sup>Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. <sup>18</sup>Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently. <sup>19</sup>As the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him. <sup>20</sup>The LORD descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain. So Moses went up <sup>21</sup>and the LORD said to him, "Go down and warn the people so they do not force their way through to see the LORD and many of them perish. <sup>22</sup>Even the priests, who approach the LORD, must consecrate themselves, or the LORD will break out against them." <sup>23</sup>Moses said to the LORD, "The people cannot come up Mount Sinai, because you yourself warned us, 'Put limits around the mountain and set it apart as holy.'" <sup>24</sup>The LORD replied, "Go down and bring Aaron up with you. But the priests and the people must not force their way through to come up to the LORD, or he will break out against them." <sup>25</sup>So Moses went down to the people and told them.

### Matthew 5:13-20 (NIV)

<sup>13</sup>"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. <sup>14</sup>"You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup>Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. <sup>16</sup>In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

<sup>17</sup>"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. <sup>18</sup>For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. <sup>19</sup>Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>20</sup>For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

## Sermon: *BE* The Church!

I don't know about you, but I'm drawn to mountains. It's not that I'm a great hiker, it's just that I can admire their grandeur and find it aesthetically pleasing to see a rocky, snow-covered mountain against a blue sky on a sunny day. Such a view is often accompanied by a river or lake in the foreground and forests on the slopes of the mountain. This inspiring picture is, of course, very Canadian. The biblical mountains are nothing like that; they are, perhaps, less dramatic, and often in wilderness-like places. But they are still inspirational places where the earth meets the sky. Traditionally, and somewhat symbolically, holy people - such as prophets - climb mountains to have an encounter with God. In our Old Testament reading, Moses went up Mount Sinai and heard from God, who gave him a message to give to the people.<sup>1</sup> God told Moses to remind them how he brought them out of Egypt and cared for them. He now wanted to establish a covenant with the Israelites and claimed they would be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." Moses relayed this message to Jacob's descendants, who agreed to become God's chosen people. Moses then told the Israelites to purify themselves and be prepared to have an encounter with the living God. Only Moses went up the mountain to be with God in the cloud, but there was still plenty of drama for the people below to appreciate that God was powerfully present.<sup>2</sup> When Moses returned, he brought with him the 10 Commandments.<sup>3</sup>

In the Sermon on the Mount,<sup>4</sup> Matthew is continuing his portrayal of Jesus as a Moses-like figure.<sup>5</sup> Just as God commissioned Moses at the burning bush,<sup>6</sup> so there is a commissioning of Jesus at his baptism<sup>7</sup> and this is later reiterated at Christ's transfiguration - also on a mountain - when the voice from heaven says: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. *Listen to him!*"<sup>8</sup> Just as Moses was God's authorized messenger to the people, so is Jesus. And in Matthew's gospel, Jesus also goes up a mountain and, through this sermon, he explains and reinterprets God's purposes and ways to the people of God. Those who follow Jesus will therefore be part of the new exodus, the new people of God, who will, by God's Spirit, become a holy community that - in due course - would also include non-Jews.<sup>9</sup> In contrast with Moses, where the people cannot approach God and must stay at the foot of

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<sup>1</sup> Exod 19:3b-6.

<sup>2</sup> Exod 19:16-19.

<sup>3</sup> Exod 20:1-17. (Despite Exod 19:24, there seems to be some ambiguity as to Aaron's presence; see Exod 20:21; 24:1-2.)

<sup>4</sup> See Matt 5:1-7:29.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew has already portrayed Jesus as a Moses-like figure. Like in the story of Moses in the bulrushes as a baby (Exod 1:15-2:10), Jesus is also rescued from a vindictive leader who wants to kill babies (Matt 2:13). Jesus goes into Egypt (Matt 2:13-18) and returns (Matt 3:19-23) to be baptised (Matt 3:13-17), passing through the waters (the River Jordan) that mirror the Red Sea, and then goes into the wilderness for 40 days to be tempted (Matt 4:1-11). This also mirrors the 40 years of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness. They, however, fail when they are tempted whereas Jesus does not. He resists the devil and, by implication, now has authority of all in the devil's dominion (demons, and evil and its effects). In this sense Jesus, in addition to being a Moses-like figure, is the "representative" of the new Israel, the new people of God, indeed, the *Messiah*, God's Chosen One.

<sup>6</sup> Exod 3.

<sup>7</sup> Matt 3:13-17.

<sup>8</sup> Matt 17:5.

<sup>9</sup> See 1 Pet 2:4-10. The early church had clearly made this connection.

Mount Sinai, Jesus invites his followers to be with him and he teaches them himself.<sup>10</sup> I see this as important. I also think there is added significance because if Jesus is God made flesh, as the Christian Creeds make clear, then God is *not* distant and unapproachable. Not only does he *reveal* himself to us in the person of Jesus, but *invites* us to himself to learn from him directly.

*Who* is the audience for the Sermon on the Mount? As you heard last week, Jesus is addressing *ordinary* people, like you and me, who are poor in spirit, mourning, meek, hungering and thirsting after God's ways, those who are merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, and persecuted.<sup>11</sup> This *doesn't* mean that *every* individual has *all* these qualities, of course, but that those within God's kingdom will have these various attributes at some point in their lives - and they will be "*blessed.*" The kingdom of God<sup>12</sup> will, then, be a *new community* where people carry one another's burdens and continue to live out the non-violent example that Jesus lived and taught.<sup>13</sup> This revolutionary movement would *not*, as many Jews of the day had hoped, try to overthrow the Roman government by force - as others had attempted and failed. This new messianic community will be instead the "new Israel" led by 12 disciples, corresponding to the 12 tribes of Israel, and would ultimately come to be known as people of "The Way,"<sup>14</sup> later "Christians,"<sup>15</sup> or the "Church."

If we are to follow the divine command from the mountain and "*listen to Jesus,*" *what* exactly does he say? The second part of our gospel reading begins with Jesus saying, "Don't think that I have come to abolish the Law or the prophets; I haven't come to abolish them but to fulfill them."<sup>16</sup> This statement can be confusing, not only in light of St. Paul's emphasis on grace, but because what Jesus later says in the Sermon on the Mount makes it sound like the demands of the Jewish Torah have become even more burdensome! (We will hear more about that next week.) What Jesus is affirming here is the *value* or *merits* of the Old Testament while criticizing his Jewish contemporaries' interpretation of it.<sup>17</sup> In "fulfilling" the law what Jesus is doing is *summarizing* it and *reinterpreting* since he has God's authority to do so. As I said a moment ago, Jesus' divine authorization was evident at his baptism, and will become even clearer with the rest of the events in Jesus' life, including his death and resurrection. In other words, Matthew's gospel is going to show how the kingdom Jesus inaugurated would be the *fulfillment* all

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<sup>10</sup> See also Exod 24:12-13. This may point to the identity of Jesus being *more* than a prophet (even God incarnate). Note that although the word "disciples" is used in Matt 5:1, Matthew does not list the 12 disciples until 10:1-4. (See also Matt 9:9.)

<sup>11</sup> Matt 5:3-11.

<sup>12</sup> Or "kingdom of heaven" in Matthew; it means the same thing.

<sup>13</sup> "The sermon is not meant to make us feel guilty but make us realize how much we need Jesus and each other" – Hauerwas.

<sup>14</sup> See Acts 9:2; 19:9,23; 22:4; 24:14,22.

<sup>15</sup> See Acts 11:26.

<sup>16</sup> Matt 5:17. This opens up the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, see Matt 7:12. "The Law or the Prophets" is what is meant by "Scripture" in New Testament literature/times, i.e., the whole of Old Testament from the Pentateuch to Malachi. This comment of Jesus was also likely something that Matthew heard as a criticism of Christians in his own day.

<sup>17</sup> Jesus will later criticize the scribes and Pharisees for hypocrisy (Matt 15:1-9; 23:23,25-26) and all these criticisms are made from within Israel's understanding of the purpose of the law.

Israel believed in and longed for, so explaining how his gospel is indeed “good news.”<sup>18</sup> That being the case, we are right to “*listen to him.*”<sup>19</sup>

The key point for today is that at the outset of this sermon, Jesus addresses *them all* and calls them to “*BE the Church*”! You see, God had earlier called Israel to be the “salt of the earth,”<sup>20</sup> but Israel was behaving like everyone else with their power politics, factional squabbling and attempted militant revolutions. Israel’s “salt” had lost its distinctive taste. “How can salt lose its taste?” you may ask. Its chemical formula and properties obviously can’t change, but it *can* become worthless if it’s full of impurities. Then salt cannot function as a preservative or as seasoning, or have purification and healing properties; in that case, “It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.”<sup>21</sup> The implication is that God’s had intended Israel to be “salt for the world” and they had failed in their calling as a “holy nation.” Consequently, God was going to do something *dramatically new* through Jesus the Messiah that fulfills God’s promises in a different way. Jesus is saying to his followers, “*You all – as a community – you are the salt of the earth*”<sup>22</sup> That is *our* role, but there is *no* reason for us to be smug about it! It remains our calling and a challenge, because if *we* fail in our calling and have no distinctiveness, or if we deny our mission, then we too are worthless salt.

Jesus then reiterates that proclamation using a different metaphor, “*You all are the light of the world.*”<sup>23</sup> Jews on hearing this would remember the words of the prophet Isaiah who said: “I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. *I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles*, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in *darkness.*”<sup>24</sup> Israel was to be the people through whom God’s bright light shined into the world’s dark corners, including to non-Jews. This light was not simply to reveal evil, but to enable people who were blundering around in darkness to find their way. Jesus then says, “A town built on a hill cannot be hidden.”<sup>25</sup> This would instantly be understood as signifying Jerusalem on its strategic hill-top location, along with the implied criticism that

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<sup>18</sup> If God is powerfully through Jesus then there *should* be some connection with the Old Testament. (This is also the reason why Matthew makes lots of connections between the life of Jesus and the Old Testament prophets.) This sermon probably made better sense to Matthew’s *readers* than to the original audience on the mountain!

<sup>19</sup> The rest of the Sermon on the Mount will explain what that all means. See also Isa 2:2-5, perhaps especially v3: “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the temple of the God of Jacob. *He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.*” (emphasis mine.)

<sup>20</sup> “The earth” is a Matthean term meaning “the world.” Salt has many connotations in the Old Testament, including sacrifice (Lev 2:13; Ezek 43:24), loyalty to the covenant (2 Chron 13:5; Num 18:19), eating together (which was called “sharing salt”), purification and healing (2 Kings 2:19–22), seasoning (Job 6:6), and as a preservative.

<sup>21</sup> Matt 5:13b.

<sup>22</sup> Matt 5:13a – the “you” is plural. This is the calling of the whole *community*; we sometimes (erroneously) see this through the lens of Western *individualism*.

<sup>23</sup> Matt 5:14.

<sup>24</sup> Isa 42:6-7; see also Isa 49:6. (See also Isa 42:1-4; 49:1-7 for context.) And see Luke 4:18-19.

<sup>25</sup> Matt 5:14b.

Israel herself had failed to be God’s beacon of hope and light to the *whole* world.<sup>26</sup> What happens if people who are called to be “light-bearers” become part of the darkness? Well, they have become like the salt that can’t be distinguished from its surroundings and has lost its distinctive saltiness – it’s worthless. *Don’t* let that happen Jesus warns his followers: *BE the Church!*<sup>27</sup>

As I have indicated, we can’t understand what being salt and light means without realizing that Jesus is also criticizing the status quo within Judaism.<sup>28</sup> This exhortation for the Church to *be* salt and light means that we are *not* to be an introverted community; we can’t lose our distinctive flavor or hide the light. Jesus is *not* challenging us, his followers, to “try harder”; no, we *are* what we are as members of the Jesus community and we’re *not* to be embarrassed or ashamed about it! Remember, salt does not generate its *own* saltiness, and light doesn’t generate its *own* light. But once the light has been lit it must shine, and once we have been given saltiness,<sup>29</sup> we must let its function be evident in our surroundings. If a church or its members wants to hide, or be invisible, or indistinguishable from our surrounding culture, then we have denied our call.<sup>30</sup> One of the problems of church history in the West has been the marriage of and state resulting in a so-called “Christian nation.”<sup>31</sup> This has tended to make the church invisible. With the collapse of Christendom – that mythological “Christianized West” – local churches have to either shine brightly or admit that it doesn’t really believe its distinctive message and so fade away.<sup>32</sup> That is a choice for St. Andrew’s and for every church and every denomination. What will we do?

It’s not easy to be salt and light, either as a community or as individuals. That’s because the world is lost in darkness and resists light and tries to extinguish it. Let me give you two examples. Last Friday, a Wuhan doctor<sup>33</sup> who attempted to warn the public about a potential new coronavirus outbreak died from the infection. The Chinese authorities targeted him for spreading “rumors” about the new virus, when he was in fact sharing accurate information and trying and raise the alarm. He was proclaiming “an inconvenient truth” that others wanted to cover up. It is not easy to shine a light when darkness is preferred. This week we also heard from a man of conscience, Senator Mitt Romney, who voted against the party line because he a made an oath before God, like all the other US Senators, to judge Trump’s impeachment trial as impartially as he could. My point is *not* about politics here, but about having the

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<sup>26</sup> Matthew believes that Israel has failed to carry out this mission to the world and that church is now charged with this task Matt 28:18–20. The statements here are not a polemic against Jews but rather it’s a warning to the disciples not to fail in their mission.

<sup>27</sup> If you want a mountain-top experience of God; *BE* the church!

<sup>28</sup> That is one reason why Jesus came at that time in history, and also why, in the nativity story, Matthew stresses the *non-Jewish* wise men from the east who seek, find, and worship the light that is Jesus.

<sup>29</sup> Saltiness is essential to salt as shining is to light; the Church must be both to the world.

<sup>30</sup> Bonhoeffer (and Hauerwas).

<sup>31</sup> See also: <https://securerusercontent.com/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/God-and-Politics.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> Of course, this does *not* mean that those who follow Jesus do so that they may be *seen*, but to let things be seen as they really are. Neither are we meant to be different just for the sake of being different. We are different because we are part of God’s family.

<sup>33</sup> Dr. Li Wenliang, 34; see: <https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/06/asia/wuhan-coronavirus-update-intl-hnk/index.html> .

courage act out of conviction. In making a stand, he knew he would be persecuted for his action – and that has started with a vengeance from members of his *own* political party. Jesus never said being salt and light would be easy; in fact he predicted it would be *very* hard. Just before commanding his followers to “*BE* the Church” he said: “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”<sup>34</sup> I am sure this applies to Mitt Romney and the Wuhan “whistleblower.” Nevertheless, what makes these two examples noteworthy and relevant for today is that Jesus was calling a *community* to be the salt and light, and not just individuals. That community is the church – followers of the Jesus way – where one should be able to expect mutual support and encouragement, together with the Spirit’s help in shining Christ’s light in a dark world. We are therefore not to be salt and light *alone*. This community here is also to help you and me shine here in Amherstburg and our wider regions of influence.

In conclusion, there is much darkness in the world - racism, greed, rampant ambition, and all kinds of injustice. Will we as individuals hide and not speak out when our conscience tells us we should? Will we be visible as a church community? The more we function as God’s community and are actively “being” the Church, the more the dark forces of evil will be dispelled and the preserving, healing, and purifying function of salt will enhance our world for the good of everyone. We can’t do this on our own, God’s Spirit is our Helper. Let us put the light we have<sup>35</sup> on a lampstand so that gives light to everyone around us, for there are many who are lost in the darkness needing to find the Way. Amen. Let us pray.

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<sup>34</sup> Matt 5:10-12.

<sup>35</sup> Or, perhaps more accurately, *reflect* God’s light.