

22 December 2024

The Light of the World
Matthew / Mateo 5:14-16

[Presented as the Children's Message] Four hundred years ago, a Spanish missionary to a small village in what is now Mexico had a problem: he wanted to teach the illiterate villagers of his flock the story of Christ, but he was astute enough to know that just telling them was not enough. We simply don't always retain what we hear. So, perhaps remembering religious festivals he had known as a child in Spain, he invented a Christmas play and recruited the whole town to be a part of it. The story of the play was the story from Luke 2, where Joseph and the very-pregnant Mary tried to find a place to stay in Bethlehem, but found that there was "no room for them at the inn." The priest recruited a Mary and Joseph to begin going around town to the different houses, begging for shelter, but all the townspeople had been coached to refuse. After each slammed door, though, the people of that house would join the procession, so that by the end, the whole town was being turned away with Mary and Joseph. At last, they would arrive at the church, where all were welcome. It worked. The poor villagers, living each day on the edge of need, learned in a deep and memorable way, that the God that the Spanish priest represented had also known need and rejection, that he had been one of them.

That pageant, known as Las Posadas, or "the inns," continues to this day. Our scripture today comes from the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew chapter 5, verses 14-16. We will read it first in English, and then in Spanish.

¹⁴You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. 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. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

¹⁴Vosotros sois la luz del mundo: una ciudad asentada sobre un monte no se puede esconder. ¹⁵Ni se enciende una lámpara y se pone debajo de un almud, mas sobre el candelero, y alumbra á todos los que están en casa. ¹⁶Así alumbre vuestra luz delante de los hombres, para que vean vuestras obras buenas, y glorifiquen á vuestro Padre que está en los cielos

We've spent the whole month of December with the metaphor of light in scripture, which is a little dangerous. A metaphor is a simple comparison, generally used to make a single point. It is not an allegory – which is a comparison where every detail has a different intended meaning. If you push a metaphor that far, what happens is that you end up finding meaning that was never meant and making the metaphor mean whatever you want. I don't want to do that, even with such a fertile and flexible and universal metaphor as light.

But today I can't help it, because Jesus did it first. He starts out with a simple metaphor: *You are the light of the world*. Then, in a few brief lines, he piles an amazing amount of further interpretation onto those words. Let's start with the basic metaphor. What does it mean when he tells his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount that they are the "light of the world"? Any thoughts? What does that mean for you? [Discuss. We'll probably end up with something like this: The world is wandering blindly in darkness – of sin or ignorance or selfishness – but we,

who have met Christ, are the lights that can show them the way.] Not hard. Scary, but straightforward.

But then Jesus starts adding meaning to this simple lesson. I count four major additions. First, light is powerful. Jesus says, *A city set on a hill cannot be hid*. And immediately we have a visual image, don't we? Picture yourself traveling on an unlit, moonless night. Then you look up, and in the distance you see the lights of a city rising above the horizon. That light, which can be seen for miles in any direction, represents hope and purpose. And it doesn't even have to be a big light. Even a single lamp can be visible for miles. Indeed, the deeper the darkness is, the brighter the light seems. That's who we are supposed to be. We are to be the single light that gives hope in the darkness, the light that does not go out even when the darkness is deepest. That's when our light shines the brightest. When Jesus tells us we are the light of the world, he means that we are to be that hope when all other hope has faded into the dark.

And yet – here's Jesus's second addition – that light that is powerful enough to give direction for miles in the deepest darkness is, paradoxically, also fragile. Jesus says, *No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand*. What would happen if we put a bushel basket over a lamp? Its light wouldn't show. It would be as if the light were not there at all. Maybe no one is able to hide the lights of a city on a hill; but we are all capable of hiding our own light. How? What obstacles hide the light of Christ within us? The word of encouragement we do not say. The visit or call we do not make. The smile we are too busy to give the stranger. The extra minute of listening we don't make time for. The forgiveness we withhold. The grudge we cling to. The grace we do not grant. We – the ones that Jesus called the light of the world – are also the ones most able and most likely to hide that light from others. The lamp is lit, but its power is only visible when we uncover it.

Third – and this is related to the second point – the light we've been give is not for ourselves alone. Jesus says, *[the lamp] gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others*. There is something communal about light, isn't there? We gather around campfires and fireplaces. Lights draws people together. In power outages, people collect in groups around whatever light they can find, because in darkness we are alone. You know, I think that child who is afraid of the dark is not really afraid of the dark. That child is afraid of being alone. Why do I think that? Take that crying child's hand and say, "I'm here," and though the darkness is still there, the child is no longer afraid. Light does not just mean being able to see; it also means being connected to others. If we have been given light, we have been given it to share with others. The light of Christ is to create connection, to build relationship, to join people together against darkness and loneliness and fear.

Finally, Jesus draws a fourth lesson from this metaphor. If we are to be the light of the world, that light will show in our actions, rather than in our words. Jesus said, *let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven*. Not "so that they can hear your excellent words or your sound teaching or your moral instruction." No, it's "so they can see your good works."

I want to take a moment over this point, because it's not how we've been conditioned to think in the past few centuries. Ever since the beginning of the so-called Age of Reason and the Scientific Revolution, we have learned to associate "light" with "intelligence." After all, what's another word for the Age of Reason? The *Enlightenment*. We call smart people "bright" or even "brilliant." We picture a good idea as a light bulb above the head, and when someone finally

understands something, we say “the light just came on.” We are so used to automatically associating the image of light with knowledge and science and understanding that we might understand Jesus’ words “You are the light of the world” as an instruction to go teach stuff to people, to educate them with some important knowledge. Maybe to take a message or teach a set of doctrines or get people to intellectually accept certain statements as true. Much of the Christian missionary endeavor of the past two centuries has focused on teaching concepts.

But that’s not what Jesus says here. People will see us as the light of the world when they see our good works, when they see how we live, when they see the depth and breadth of our love for others. That’s when people see the light that is Christ. In fact, that’s one reason for the Incarnation of Christ that we celebrate at Christmas. People sometimes try to reduce Christ to the status of a “great moral teacher,” but Jesus didn’t come to earth just to teach; he came to be. He didn’t come to explain, but to demonstrate. He didn’t come to tell people how to live; he came to do it with them. He had tried sending words before. He had sent lawgivers, judges, poets, and prophets all with a message, and they’re great. But words weren’t enough. For us to understand, we had to see what the image of God looked like in person. Jesus became one of us, and in that shared life he lit our way.

So, to sum it up, we are, in fact, the light of the world. This world contains great darkness, but the light that is in us through the Spirit of Christ can cut through that darkness. Indeed, it may be the only thing that can. So do not hide your light. That light was not given to us so that we could be shiny, but so we can give light to others. Set your light up high so that your love and compassion and mercy and forgiveness are not hidden, and in that light God will draw all people to himself. Then they will *glorify our Father who is in heaven*.

The Las Posadas processions tell that story, and more importantly, they invite people to live it. Those who participate get to know what it feels like wander friendless in the darkness, looking for light, and also what it feels like to hide the light of Christ under a bushel – by slamming the door on someone else. But most of all, they learn that the light of Christ, however often it is pushed away, cannot be extinguished.