

Yes, You Are!
Isaiah 42: 5-7, Mt 5:13-16
February 12, 2023
West Valley Presbyterian

SLIDE 1

1. Last week we talked about being blessed. When Jesus uses that word, he means that we are blessed because God is connected to us and we are connected to God. And that makes it possible to do things like make peace. And receive things like comfort when we mourn. We are blessed before we are a blessing; we are blessed to be a blessing.

2. Being a blessing is what we're talking about this week. Specifically, today's Scripture tells us who Jesus is; and then Jesus tells us who we are right now in God. Right this very minute in this very place.

Let's read the Scripture passages out loud together – they are short!

SLIDE 2-4

The first one is Isaiah 42:5-7, and it's God speaking to Jesus.

"This is what God the LORD says—

the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out,

who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it,

who gives breath to its people,

and life to those who walk on it:

⁶"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,

⁷to open eyes that are blind,

to free captives from prison

and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness."

So if Jesus is a light for the Gentiles (and in his day, that also included a lot of the people right there in Galilee), and if Jesus releases those who sit in darkness from their dungeons, and if we are connected to Jesus, then this is what he says we are, in Matthew 5:13-16.

SLIDE 5-7

¹³ “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.

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

3. Does Jesus say, “You might become” the salt of the earth and the light of the world if you’re really lucky and you try really hard? No. Does Jesus say, “You will be” the salt of the earth and the light of the world at some point in the distant future? No. He says “You ARE the salt of the earth...You ARE the light of the world.” Right NOW. Right this minute. Right here. You are already salt and light. So if that’s who we are, what does that mean? What is Jesus saying to us?

4. The first one: You are the salt of the earth.

That may not actually sound like a very good thing to us. We live in a world these days where low-sodium is considered a good thing. Which actually does make a certain amount of sense, because in our world salt is really cheap and it’s added to practically everything. The food we eat every day is salty; and it’s only things like unsalted raw vegetables or fruits, that aren’t. So, being the salt of the earth may not sound all that appealing to us.

But in Jesus’ day, there weren’t such things as potato chips. In fact, there were no potatoes in that part of the world at that time. There was unprocessed grain, fresh water fish, grapes, dates and vegetables, none of which have much salt in them at all. Except for salt water fish and salt-cured olives, Jesus lived in a naturally low sodium world- and so did everybody else. And people craved salt. They physically worked hard; it’s hot there; so they sweated a lot. They needed salt. It was a gift, a blessing, something they really needed.

And not only that: In Jesus’ day there were no refrigerators. It wasn’t cold enough in the winter to reliably freeze things. So how did you store meat, or fish, or vegetables, so that they wouldn’t spoil? You salted them. So salt was not only something that people craved. It was also something that ensured that they wouldn’t get food poisoning. Salt prevents rot and putrefaction.

So when Jesus says you are the salt of the earth, he means at least 2 things: You are providing something that others really need, and in fact crave; AND, that you are preventing rot in the world. Moral rot. In the WHOLE WORLD. You are preserving what is good in the world, and you are helping people to thrive. That’s who you are.

5. The second thing Jesus says you are, is the light of the world. Not just the light of a household. Not just the light of a community. You are the light of the WORLD. Right now. Together. This minute.

SLIDE 8, SHOWING A BIBLICAL ERA LAMP (EBay, seller's photo, not copyrighted)

Now, in Japantown, where I live, it isn't ever really dark. There's so much electric light, such as street lights and signs and headlights, that even at midnight you can't see the stars. You can see the moon and maybe a planet or two, but that's all. So, a little tiny oil lamp like this? Wouldn't make much difference in our world.

But in Jesus' day, the night was really dark. The only manmade source of light was fire, and there were some issues with that. Bonfires aren't portable. Torches are single use, and dangerous. So mostly, people used little oil lamps that were safe enough to hold in their hands or put on a lamp stand. They filled the body of the lamp with oil, and put in a wick, which could be lit from a fire. And you can refill the oil as often as you need to, to keep the light burning. These little lamps provided about as much light as a candle would do; and, candles can't be refilled.

So when Jesus says that you are the light of the world, it's this little lamp light that he's talking about. It's this kind of lamp that you put on a stand so that it gives light to everyone in the house. We do not have to be big or flashy to make a difference. We don't need to be. The small lights that we already are, are the light of the world.

And how can that be? Well, the houses of Jesus' day were mostly very small, made of rocks and mud, with a roof made of wood and mud – so, only a couple of hundred square feet. The light from a small lamp would be enough for people in the house to see. What about a whole town? Jesus says that a town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Sure, by day, you're going to see a town on a hill. But at night? Well, what if everyone in the town has their little lamps burning? That light adds together. It combines and reaches into the darkened world. Passersby can see the town by night as well as by day, if everyone's lights are all shining.

6. Once Jesus tells us what we are, then he tells us what we are to do.

A. First, the salt: He says, "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."

a. As a former chemist, this verse didn't make sense to me at first. Salt is sodium chloride, and you can't make it sodium chloride unsalty unless you separate the sodium ions from the chloride ions, which is exceedingly difficult. So in case you too took science classes, it'll help to remember that "salt" wasn't pure sodium chloride back in Jesus' day. It came from boiling down salt water, or

mining from underground; and in both cases, there were a lot of other minerals present as well as sodium chloride.

b. So Jesus is warning us. If we're not acting like the salt we are, then we are not doing what God created us to do. If we are not helping people to thrive, we aren't doing what God created us to do, and we aren't fulfilling who we are. If we are not preserving what is necessary and preventing it from rotting away, then we aren't doing what God created us to do, and we aren't fulfilling who we are. We aren't blessing others or ourselves, and we are at risk of being swept out of the house and put in the dustbin.

B. Second, the light: Jesus says, "In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."

a. Jesus does NOT tell us to let our light shine before others so that the others will say, "Wow, what a great person you are!" That's a trap we often fall into. We want to claim credit for ourselves. But if we do, that's dangerous. We get all puffed up with vanity. If we get all puffed up, we can't see where we're going. And if we can't see where we're going, we stumble and fall.

b. So Jesus says to let our light shine before others so that others will glorify our Father in heaven. Not us. Because if others are glorifying God because of what we do, then the focus stays on God, where it should be. Keeping the focus on God is a win for everyone. We don't get swelled heads; we feel good inside; and the others around us will learn more about God and hopefully get closer to him.

c. Notice also that Jesus says that we should let OUR light shine before others. We glorify God with our own lights, not with other people's lights. What if I decided that I should glorify God by working the cameras back there? Well, there wouldn't BE a livestream if I was in charge of it. We each one can glorify God with the individual lights he has given to each one of us. And if we do that, some amazing things can happen.

C. For example, Donna Perry and Terri Dias and I went to the ECO National Gathering two weeks ago. We heard from many people about how their lights are shining before others. Donna's going to come up and tell you about God's light shining in the midst of video gamers.

D. Terri can't be in our midst this morning, because her light is shining in the Sunday School class on Learning About My Bible. But she asked me to tell you about one of the breakout sessions she went to, about "creating naturally supernatural disciples." She says, "The breakout session leaders told us that they regularly walk their

neighborhood, attempt to connect with anyone they see, and offer to pray with/ for anyone as the Holy Spirit leads them. Their emphasis is on listening – to the people and to the Holy Spirit, asking Him, “What do you want me to do or say?” During the lockdowns, they also hosted outdoor “COVID safe” parties- simply hot cider and individually wrapped snacks or cold drinks and packs of snacks- as a way to provide community and get to know people- again praying with/for anyone as the Holy Spirit led them to do. These were very simple prayers, such as, “God, thank you for loving my friend so and so, please heal his back and keep him safe as he travels.”

E. What Terri heard about were very simple examples of being salt and light, that any of us could do at any time.

7. So, let me ask you this: Does Jesus say that we ever stop being salt or light? No. He doesn't. There's no expiration date. There's no retirement party. While we belong to Jesus in this world, then we are salt and light. That is who we are. It's our identity. What we do with our lives flows from who we are.

A. Now it's true that we do different things with our lives at different stages in our lives. A young student would be the light of the world in school, for instance. A grandparent could be salt and light by looking after the grandkids or volunteering with a Scout troop. A physically frail person could be salt and light by praying faithfully for family and church and world.

B. But we never stop doing something that comes from who we are in Jesus. Remember Jesus' warning about the salt losing its saltiness.

C. I am so impressed with the salt and light in this church- there are examples of it everywhere I look. For example, I'm looking right now at the sound and camera and power point volunteers. Every single week there are three of them there, and what they are doing is an expression of love for Jesus and for his people. When you're doing tech, you don't get to relax and worship. Instead, your worship is concentrating on making sure that everyone else can worship. What you do requires special skills, and it also requires a willingness to put aside your own needs for the sake of others – just like Jesus did.

D. Or the deacons, working mostly behind the scenes, to make sure that people are prayed for, and have a friend in the congregation, and are supported in their time of grief.

E. Or the finance people who make sure that our finances are above reproach for the sake of God's glory. Or the buildings and grounds people, who, mostly behind the scenes, see to it that our buildings are safe and that everything works, so that we have electricity and plumbing and heat when we gather together.

F. Or the dozens of other things that I see happening every week, that shine God's glory into a dark and troubled world.

Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." Let's pray that God would help us all to be what we are.