

Jesus said, "Let Me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You've lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage. Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand - shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.

Don't suppose for a minute that I have come to demolish the Scriptures - either God's Law or the Prophets. I'm not here to demolish but to complete. I am going to put it all together, pull it all together in a vast panorama. God's Law is more real and lasting than the stars in the sky and the ground at your feet. Long after stars burn out and earth wears out, God's Law will be alive and working.

Trivialize even the smallest item in God's Law and you will only have trivialized yourself. But take it seriously, show the way for others, and you will find honor in the kingdom. Unless you do far better than the Pharisees in the matters of right living, you won't know the first thing about entering the kingdom." Matthew 5: 13-20

Today's scripture lesson is a section from Matthew's gospel about Jesus, the Teacher. Jesus' ministry had began with His baptism in the Jordan River, when He demonstrated His solidarity with you and me by taking part in the ritual of repentance and renewal. As God, Jesus had no need to repent and be forgiven, but as a human-being, Jesus fully experienced our life, and our need to die to sin and rise, born anew, in right relationship with God and others. Matthew takes us through the beginning of Jesus' ministry: when He called the first disciples to follow Him; that He healed people who were brought to Him with all kinds of illness; and how He taught anyone who would listen to Him about the Kingdom of God. Jesus first ministered to people's physical needs, and then He taught them about spiritual growth and healing possible in God's Kingdom. He taught that blessings in God's Kingdom didn't look anything like blessings

in common culture or even in common religious practices. And He taught what is expected of people who are called and blessed by God. This is where we pick up Matthew's gospel today, and it's spot-on about us, the church in the 21st century. Like the first disciples we've been called to follow Jesus. Because we've experienced God's love, mercy, and grace, we can trust God to shape us into what God needs us to be: salt and light.

Matthew's gospel was written to his fellow Jews, and it's also meant for us. As we meditate on and ponder Jesus' words, may we catch glimpses of the Kingdom of God... and may our spirits awaken from apathy and dullness... and may we imagine ourselves sitting with Jesus, the Teacher, learning from Him, and taking His message to heart. I like *The Message* translation of the bible because often it helps me hear things I've heard so many times that I don't hear them anymore. In this translation of Matthew, Jesus says, "Let Me tell you why you are here." Why are we here? Like Simon and Andrew and James and John, the first disciples to respond to Jesus' call to follow Him into the new realm of God.

We are here to be salt and light, and to profess that the Kingdom of God has already begun. That's almost comical to say, and to believe... that the Kingdom of God has begun. Google pictures of the devastation in Syria; or pass by the homeless camps in Oakland and San Francisco; or read about the staggering numbers of people in refugee camps; or notice the divisiveness and intolerance in our country; or be mindful of your own sin and faithlessness, and believe anyway... choose to believe anyway that God's Kingdom has begun.

Listen again to Jesus' words for you. (This is the *Amplified Bible* Translation)

"You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has lost its taste or purpose, how can it be made salty? It is no longer good for anything, but to be thrown out and walked on by people. You are the light of Christ to the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before others in such a way that they may see your good deeds and moral excellence, and recognize and honor and glorify your God."

Why are we here? We're here to be the salt of the earth, giving back (to other people, to those in need, and perhaps especially to those we're pretty sure don't deserve it) the love, mercy, and justice God gives to us. We're here to be used by God, to reveal the flavor of God's Kingdom, already begun on earth. In the ancient world salt was highly valued and used as currency. Roman soldiers could be paid in salt. Although salt can't lose its saltiness, Jews believe it can become unclean, and worthless. There's a spirit of warning from Jesus throughout the gospels, about hearing and not acting on His words. Here He compares those who are faithless to salt that's lost its value and purpose and is good for nothing. But He gives a follow-up invitation to us, to be light to the world, so that others will see and be drawn to God.

We gather as the Church - in worship and in groups and classes - to remind ourselves, and others, that contrary to what it looks like (and it may look like the world is going to the dogs) the Kingdom of God has arrived; it's already begun. We're already witnessing and revealing little tastes and little glimpses of God's Kingdom in the ways we love, and welcome, and include all people; in being fully present - body, mind, and

spirit - in worship; in acts of compassion and service; in offering undeserved forgiveness; in standing up for what's right and just; in deeply listening to God's silence... in these and many more ways, we're showing and telling others that God's Kingdom is here, has already begun.

Jesus said, "Let Me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth." We are here to experience God's Kingdom, and to reveal it to all others who are thirsting and longing for the love and justice and peace it promises. Jesus said, "You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept." We're here to practice our faith in the darkest places, where the light of Christ can shine the brightest. We're here to bring the warmth and radiance of Jesus' love into desperate places: helping the immigrant and the refugee, feeding and housing the poor, comforting the grieving, bringing peace to tense and angry situations, loving the unlovable... and we're here to profess that we shine light in the darkness because Jesus has told us to... because Jesus' light has shined in our darkness, which isn't so dark and scary and lonely anymore. We're here to shine light in the darkest places because we believe that there's no darkness that can't be overcome by the love of Jesus Christ. We're here [motion the church] here in this place - to be aware of where His light needs to shine in the darkness of our own hearts. And we're there [motion outside] in the world to shine, to reveal that God's Kingdom has already begun.... in here [hands on heart]... and out there.

Jesus taught that His followers need righteousness and faithfulness that goes beyond conventional religious practices. He said this to and about the Pharisees, and He says it to and about His Church. We're not to be the "same old, same old" religion

decade after decade, generation after generation. We have to continue to grow stronger roots of love for God, and wider branches of love and welcome for others. We have to trust God with change so we can continue to be relevant and useful, to be salt that's salty and light that can be seen. Love allows us to change: love for Jesus, and love for others who need Him. If we're not useful and relevant to God's Kingdom, Jesus said, we're not good for anything.

There was social and theological tension at that time in history. There was conflict among the Jews about what it meant to live as God's chosen people under Roman authority. There's social and theological tension in our time, and conflict about what it means to be the Church; what it means to live as disciples of Jesus at this time in history. For those who were hoping that Jesus, the Messiah, had come to kick some Roman-butt, to restore Israel as a mighty nation, Jesus was a disappointment. He said that Israel could be a holy people and a light to the nations - but not through conflict and confrontation with the Roman Empire - instead through lives of holiness, of salt and light, that revealed that God's Kingdom had already begun. Some of Jesus' followers didn't like His teaching, and fell away, but Jesus continued to show how to live in God's Kingdom that had already begun. As Jesus' followers, we are to live lives of salt and light, lives of holiness: we're to love and pray for our enemies, to show mercy and generosity and compassion, and to remain faithful and trusting that (contrary to the evidence around us) God's Kingdom has already begun.

Some of Jesus' teaching is hard to comprehend. In this gospel lesson He teaches about the value and eternal nature of the Mosaic Law, and yet He disregarded the Law when it didn't serve people in need. It's helpful to remember that Jesus always

looked at the heart of the matter, the heart of a person, and the heart of the Law. Where the Law was harsh and unforgiving, Jesus was merciful. He always chose love over tradition and scripture. Jesus saw the Pharisees, the upholders of the Law, as having little heart, little holiness, little rightness with God. Those who would be part of God's Kingdom, Jesus said, would have to do better than those Law-keepers.

There's no way to perfectly keep the Ten Commandments, and the Laws of Moses. And that's okay (says the gospel of Marylee.) Actually Jesus said it's okay, because we are God's beloved people, and when we confess our sin and brokenness, our sins are forgiven, just as we forgive the sins of others.

At a later point in Matthew's gospel, Jesus would be tested about the Law. "When the Pharisees heard how Jesus had bested the Sadducees, they gathered their forces for an assault. One of their religion scholars spoke for them, posing a question they hoped would show him up: 'Teacher, which command in God's Law is the most important?' Jesus said: Love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence. This is the most important, the first on any list. But there is a second to set alongside it: Love others as well as you love yourself. These two commands are pegs; everything in God's Law and the Prophets hangs from them." So to fulfill the Law... is to love.

Why are we here? And how should we live in this time in history when God's Kingdom has begun and yet it's so painfully obvious that it's not fully here? We're to be salt and light - practicing love, and mercy, and justice - that witness to God's Kingdom already begun. We're to offer ourselves, our interests and talents and passion, for God's Spirit to use to bring flavor and spice to the world. We're to show and tell others that

God's light can overcome any darkness. And we're to live with longing - not giving into cynicism or despair over the condition of the world, but with a kind of desperate longing - for the fulfillment of God's Kingdom to be on earth as it is in heaven. Jesus said, "Let Me tell you why you are here. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand - shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven."

Why are you here? You're here to be salt and light, and to reveal the Kingdom of God... already begun. And you're doing it! You are salt! You are light! And I see the Kingdom of God in you! Thank You, Jesus, for Your faithful people here. Continue to use us, Lord, to bless and heal the world, to reveal Your Kingdom already begun. Amen.

I'd like us to sing "Jesus, Lord, We Look to Thee" starting again with verse one, because it's the beginning of this prayer for the coming of God's Kingdom. "Jesus, Lord, we look to Thee; let us in Thy name agree; show Thyself the Prince of Peace, id our strife forever cease."