

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

February 5, 2023 – EPIPHANY 5 / YR. A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Salty Lights—for Christ, and the World*”

Isaiah 58:1-9a	(The Lord chooses justice, rather than empty fasting)
Psalms 112:1-9	(Happy are they who delight in God's commandments)
1 Corinthians 2:1-12	(Paul proclaims only Jesus crucified, not worldly wisdom)
St. Matthew 5:13-20	(Jesus tells His disciples they are the salt and light of the world)

If someone says you're “the salt of the earth,” it means you're a good person, someone who's genuine, without a lot of pretense. Makes me think of my in-laws, who are refreshingly unlike my family of origin.

Now, salt can be good or bad. We mostly use it on our food, but too much salt can give us heart problems. As a result, one finds “salt substitutes” in many homes. In Jesus' time, salt was used for enhancing food, as in our day, but also for preserving food, and for healing. Come to think of it, it still is. We gargle with warm salt-water to soothe a sore throat, and I used to have an ointment for painfully irritated eyes that was basically just salt paste.

But let's do a little time travel back about 2,000 years ago, to when ovens were made from dried mud, or earth. Jesus spoke Aramaic, and in Aramaic, the same word is used for *oven* as for *earth*. So when Jesus said “You are the salt of the earth,” He might have been saying, “You are the salt of the oven.”

Nowadays, when we light an oven we generally push a switch or turn a dial. If it's a gas oven we might just light a match. Or, we might cook on an outdoor grill, where again, we light a match. But those earthen or clay ovens of thousands of years ago had no electricity, gas, or charcoal. And wood was both scarce and too valuable to incinerate. So they burned dried manure from their animals. And they used salt to ignite it. Salt accumulated by the sea in big heaps, and this pure sea salt would ignite the ovens ... whereas regular old salt sitting around the house would not.

So when Jesus says to us, “You are the salt of the earth,” He's telling us we have what it takes to kindle a situation, to set it on fire so that it produces light, warmth, and change! We have the capacity and the gifts to get things moving. Notice, Jesus does not say, “*Go and be* the salt of the earth.” And He doesn't say, “You are *called to be* the salt of the earth.” He says, “You *are*.” Moreover, He doesn't say to His followers, “You are, and you are, and you are.” Rather, He uses the plural *you*. (Or, where I come from, “Y'all.”) All you folks are the salt of the earth. Together. So, go ignite something!

And in case we don't get it, in case the culture of 2,000 years ago has become a bit distant for us, Jesus reinforced this lesson by telling us, “You are the light of the world.” Not, “*I want you to be* the light of the world.” But you—every one of you—are lights in this world. So, let your light shine!

But we Episcopalians are kind of nervous about shining our lights. Well, possibly a small and appropriate one. Maybe a night light? Most of us are not eager to shout our faith from the roof tops. Episcopalians have been called a lot of things. We've all heard: “Whiskeypalions,” or “Country Club Christians,” or even “God's frozen chosen.” We could take offense. But people have nicknames like this for every denomination. Rather like the old light bulb jokes:

- How many Charismatics does it take to change a light bulb? One to change the bulb and nine to pray against the spirit of darkness.
- How many Calvinists does it take to change a light bulb? None. God has predestined when the light will be on.
- How many Baptists does it take to change a light bulb? Change? No way. My grandmother gave the church that light bulb 50 years ago!
- How many TV evangelists does it take to change a light bulb? One. But for the message of light to continue, send in your donation now!
- How many independent fundamentalists does it take to change a light bulb? Only one, because any more might result in too much cooperation.
- How many Catholics does it take to change a light bulb? None. Only candles are permitted.

- So, how many *Episcopalians* does it take to change a light bulb? The changing of the light bulb requires the approval by voice vote at two consecutive General Conventions, to be preceded by a proposal for change circulated for comment by the Standing Light Committee of each Diocese, for a minimum of 24 months. The rubric for the number required will then be incorporated into our Constitutions & Canons. Until that time, no unauthorized changing of light bulbs will be permitted, except as required for sensitivity to disadvantaged cultures.

(Sigh.) Our parish leadership is certainly familiar with Episcopal bureaucracy. But let's return to the "frozen chosen" epithet. What do our critics mean by that? It can't be that our congregations aren't welcoming. Outside nearly every Episcopal church in the United States is a sign that reads, "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You." And we're certainly open to diversity among us. Perhaps it's that we aren't shouters from the rooftops. We're hardly even knockers on doors, or callers on the phone. But we don't have to be "frozen."

An Episcopal priest who died in 2022, the Rev. Dr. Howard Hanchey, taught at Virginia Theological Seminary. He spent lots of time studying Episcopal parishes, and published numerous books on evangelism.¹ He thought it would be wonderful if we took our faith into the community and preached from street corners. But he also knew that would make most of us pretty uncomfortable.

So, Fr. Hanchey offered a new understanding of evangelism. He said God will send people to our church. The Lord will send people who will come seeking Him and looking for a parish that's their kind of place. Some will be Episcopalians who've moved to the area and are looking for a church home. Others will have been away from the church for a long time, and are deciding whether or not St. John's is a good fit for them. And still others may come looking for "something," without knowing exactly what it is.²

Fr. Hanchey was right! God *has* been sending us new people every year since I came here in 2016. Just think, we had two new people even last Sunday! Fr. Hanchey believed the most important thing we can do is to welcome these newcomers in a friendly way, and begin to find out what they, and we, have in common. To invite them to share in our ministries, and to offer whatever help we can for their needs. Our example of love, caring, and sharing can lead people to God a lot faster than shouting on street corners or banging on neighborhood doors.

As we try to do these things, we can be encouraged that Jesus is talking to us in both the *present* tense, and the *plural* voice. He's telling *every one of us* that *right now*, today, this minute, we are "salt" for the world that can kindle a flame and get things going, where, without us there might only have been a dead, stinking pile of ... well, you know.

Likewise, we are "light" for the world, a long-lasting light that doesn't require anyone to change the bulb. With what the Lord has given us through His Holy Spirit, we are already shining His truth, mercy, and grace into this dark world—unless we've forgotten to take the cap off the flashlight, or to plug in the lamp. Or (if you remember last week's sermon), maybe we've neglected to replace the batteries in our light, or to check the connecting cables.

Taking to heart the words of Jesus, try to see yourself in a new way, this coming week—as salt and light for Christ, and for the world. Your "salt" can spice things up for divine change, or preserve what is good and right. Your "salt" can light a fire under a situation to get a worthwhile thing started. Your "light" can steadily and brightly illumine the path as you talk with and care for others, helping to guide them homeward toward God as you demonstrate your love for them.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, You taught Your followers that we are 'the salt of the earth.' Salt enlivens the taste of food, retards spoilage, and is a healing agent. May we be the salt that invigorates the blandness of life without You, that prevents the rot of selfishness and sin from expanding around us, and that brings compassionate healing to the anguished souls we encounter. You have also told us we are 'the light of the world.' Light dispels darkness, enables plants to thrive, and guides travelers home. Help us to be Your lights in this world, so that our lives radiate Your love, hope, and joy. May we be beacons that lead to You everyone who is seeking the Way, the Truth, and the Life. In Your Holy Name we pray. *Amen.*³

¹ Daniel Howard Hanchey, 1941-2022. [DignityMemorial.com](https://www.dignitymemorial.com/obituaries/mechanicsville-va/daniel-hanchey-10758208/), June 2022 <https://www.dignitymemorial.com/obituaries/mechanicsville-va/daniel-hanchey-10758208/> 31 January 2023.

² Adapt. "HW in HL," n.d., [DesperatePreacher.com](https://desperatepreacher.com/sermonbuilder/Epiphany-A/5e/homily.htm) <https://desperatepreacher.com/sermonbuilder/Epiphany-A/5e/homily.htm> 31 January 2023.

³ Adapt. "Prayer of Commitment: Salt and Light," excerpted from [Catholic Online](https://www.catholic.org/prayers/prayer.php?p=829), 2022 <https://www.catholic.org/prayers/prayer.php?p=829> 31 January 2023.