

Bearing Witness to Jesus

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[0:00] Good morning, delighted that you are here. My name is Thomas. I'm the rector of this church and delighted on behalf of our team to welcome you here.

! We love this time of year. A lot of things get started that we pause over the course of the summer. You heard a little bit about our children and youth ministry earlier. It's a big part of our church. And actually beginning this Sunday, what we're going to do for the next several weeks is, and we do this this time of year pretty much every year, is to focus in on the DNA of our church.

What really is Church of the Advent all about? What do we care about? What are our values? What does it mean to live out our mission together? One of the things I hope becomes clear over these weeks is that Advent is not just what happens on Sunday mornings.

We believe that not just our church, but the church exists for the sake of others, for the sake of people outside the walls, people who might never set foot inside this building.

We believe that God put the church in the world for the sake of the world, for the life of the world. So we're going to be looking at what that means for us now that we're here in this new building and location, how we live out that mission together.

[1:14] And if you've been a part of our church, you know we've been through a lot of change. So this gives us an opportunity to sort of reimagine our mission together in Shaw and throughout D.C.

I sent a letter back in January to those of you who are part of our church. I know that feels like years ago, back in January. But laying out some of our priorities, some of our commitments, you'll see that printed on the front of the bulletin.

That's what we're going to be looking at together over the next few weeks. So this morning we're starting with this. Part of what it means to be a church that exists for the life of the world is to be a church that bears witness to Christ.

Or in the words of Jesus in Matthew 5, when he talks about bearing witness, it means being salt and light in the world.

So let's pray and then we're going to open God's word together. Lord, we thank you for your word. Lord, we thank you for your presence here in our midst. We thank you for your Holy Spirit. Lord, at this time, would you help us to let go of the things that are tugging at our attention, the distractions that are competing for the top spot, Lord, in our mind?

[2:30] Would you help us to let go of our ego, our insecurity? Would you help us to have soft and open hearts? And Lord, would you speak to us?

Would you speak to us now? We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. So we're going to consider these images of salt and light and then what they mean for us as we look to the days, weeks, months, and years ahead.

The first thing Jesus says in this passage is, and he's addressing his community of disciples, he says, you are the salt of the earth. You are the salt of the earth.

Very famous image here. People who aren't Christians, never read the Bible, are familiar with this verse. If you know about salt in the ancient world, you know that it had a number of uses.

It was used as a preservative in the days before refrigeration. It was used as an ingredient in fertilizer. It also had specific Old Testament connotations.

[3:29] It was a symbol of covenant faithfulness. So the Israelites were instructed to salt all of their offerings when they offered them to the Lord. People debate what does Jesus specifically have in mind here.

I think it's safe to say probably Jesus isn't focusing on one versus another meaning. I think he probably has all of these meanings in mind. But I would suggest that when Jesus says, you are the salt of the earth to us, what he primarily has in mind is the flavor-enhancing capacity of salt.

And the reason I think that is because in this passage, he goes on to warn them against losing their saltiness. In other words, becoming flavorless. So I think primarily he's thinking about the fact that salt uniquely enhances flavor.

The food critic and novelist Jay Rayner said that salt is the difference between eating in technicolor and eating in black and white. And I think that's true. Thomas Keller, the renowned chef, the most well-known as the chef proprietor of the French Laundry, three Michelin star restaurant out in California, he says that for both professional chefs and home cooks, the single most important skill you can gain is the ability to salt your food properly.

It is that important. So anybody wanting to up their game in the kitchen, the first thing you need to do is to learn how to use salt. If you salt a tomato, what happens?

[5:05] The tomato tastes brighter. It actually tastes sweeter. It tastes more like a tomato. So if you have a bunch of late summer tomatoes and you don't know what to do with them, just put a little salt on them.

Put them on between two slices of bread. It would be the best thing you've ever eaten, right?

Salting pasta water. And I'm not talking like a little pinch. I'm talking like a good handful of salt in that pasta water, right?

That's going to make your pasta, it's going to give it depth. It's going to give it groundedness. It's going to give it an earthiness, right? It's going to give it a kind of oomph. Otherwise, it'll taste flat, right? You have a good sauce, but the pasta underneath just tastes like it doesn't, they don't get along, you know?

The pasta is going to be a disappointment. If you salt your beef or your poultry right away, and I'm not talking like an hour before you cook. I'm talking you get home from the store. You unwrap it. You salt it liberally. And then you take it, put it in the fridge, cook it the next day. It's going to have a beefy, rich flavor.

[6:05] The crust, if you're searing it, is going to be ten times better, right? Color equals flavor. It's going to be a nice brown crust, right? Even desserts benefit from salt, right?

Sprinkle some salt on your fruit. Sprinkle some salt on anything that you're... It's going to sharpen the flavor. It's going to balance the sweetness. Put it on chocolate or caramel. It's going to make it ten times richer.

Are you hungry? Salt enhances the flavor of whatever you put it on. So, let's come back to the Scripture here. What is Jesus trying to communicate about the role of Christians in the world?

With the coming of Jesus, a new reality begins to emerge, right? The kingdom of God, Jesus says, is breaking into the world.

Imagine overlapping timelines. There's the timeline that we're a part of now, and there's a new reality, and it's overlapping, and it's breaking in, and it's starting to shine through, and you can see little glimmers of it everywhere.

[7:08] It's a new way of life. It's a new way of being human together. It's a preview of the world as it will be when Christ makes all things new.

We're getting a preview now. And as this new reality emerges, more and more people are going to have the opportunity to taste and see the goodness of God.

But this new reality needs salt. It needs salt. It needs Christians to enhance the flavors of the kingdom of God.

It needs people who are able to, by the way they live, magnify kingdom values and kingdom priorities in such a way that they are put on display so that when people taste them, they have to have more, right?

If you eat well-seasoned food as that kind of food, then you don't even know why, but you just eat it, and then you want to eat more, and you want to eat more, and you want to eat more. That's the kind of balance that comes with a well-salted dish.

[8:18] And that's what Jesus says he wants for the kingdom. The people taste it, and they just, they gotta have more. So the kingdom needs Christians, Jesus says, to help people experience the kingdom of God in technicolor, not just black and white.

So what does this look like? Well, Jesus has just described this in the verses that lead up to this. So if we read this in context, you go back to Matthew 5 verse 1, Jesus is describing what salty people look like in what we commonly refer to as the Beatitudes.

Right? So we might summarize it this way. If you look at those first verses, if you have, we have pew Bibles now, so you can turn to Matthew 5 if you want. If you look at these Beatitudes, Jesus is saying to be salty is to be, for instance, poor in spirit.

The kind of person who knows that we are spiritually bankrupt and that we depend entirely on the mercy of God. That's a salty person. A salty person is someone who mourns, is someone who's not afraid of grief and loss.

In fact, they're maybe well acquainted with grief and loss, and more importantly, they know what it means to encounter the love and comfort of God in the midst of grief. So it's people who know how to grieve and mourn.

[9 : 41] It's people who are meek. Right? A meek person is a salty person because it's someone who has rejected the culture of self-promotion, and they've embraced a life of humility and blessed self-forgetfulness.

That's putting something else on display. A salty person is someone who's willing to forgive and to show mercy rather than harboring resentment and seeking vengeance.

A salty person is someone who has a single-minded devotion to God, purity of heart rather than duplicity or compromise.

A salty person is someone who pursues harmony, who works to re-knit the social fabric of society rather than giving in to the temptation to polarization or division.

Right? It's an entirely different way, for instance, of approaching politics. That's a salty person. A salty person, we can sort of summarize what Jesus says at the end of this section here.

[10 : 48] There's someone who is so committed to following Jesus that they're willing to be persecuted because of it. They would rather have Jesus and whatever that costs them than have anything else without Jesus.

The world sees that and they realize there's something different here. Something that, something inside me craves.

That's a salty person. And remember the purpose of salt. If your food tastes salty, it means you've put too much salt on it.

Right? The purpose of salt is never to draw attention to itself. Salt uniquely is used to enhance the flavor of all of the other ingredients around it.

Not itself. Right? So, Christians likewise who are called to be salt, we have to remember, friends, it's not about us. It's not about putting our life on display.

[11 : 51] It's not about putting our church on display. The goal of salt is to enhance the flavors of the kingdom. So, a salty Christian is someone who, in all they say and do, is pointing to someone bigger.

What? Someone greater. They're pointing to Christ. So, this, I believe, is what Jesus has in mind when he calls us to be salt in the world. And then he uses a related image.

He uses the image of light. You're the light of the world. And throughout Scripture, we see light being associated with God's truth and God's holiness and God's presence and God's salvation. Light exposes what darkness conceals. Light helps people to see what is real and true. And notice the picture that Jesus chooses.

He says, a city is set on a hill. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. So, this is not an image, as compelling as it might be, this is not an image of one lone heroic person holding a candle up in the darkness.

[12 : 55] It's an image of a whole community. It's an image of a whole community visible together. Jesus is speaking to his followers in the plural. He's saying, you all together, when you're all together, are the light of the world.

So, here's the image he's trying to convey. Imagine that you are traveling at night. And this is in the world before electricity. So, other than whatever moonlight or starlight there may be, at night, it was pitch black dark once the sun went down.

If you've ever been out in the country, when it's pitch black dark and there's no electric lights around, you know exactly what I'm talking about. So, imagine traveling at night in the pitch black dark. You can't even see where you're stepping.

And then you look up and you see up on a hillside what looks like just this glowing sort of halo, right, across the horizon.

And what you're seeing are the lights of a town. And you're seeing all of the firelight and all of the candlelight of that town. Now, what would that represent to you? Right?

[13:59] That light means a lot of things that you're looking for. That light means shelter. That light means warmth. That light means hospitality. That light means community. That light means that you no longer have to be alone in the dark.

This is what Christian community is meant to be in the world. A visible sign that you don't have to be alone in the dark anymore.

There is another way to live. And there is a community of people who are ready to welcome you in and encourage you down that path. And Jesus is very clear on the nature of this light.

He says, let your light shine before others. Why? Why? So that they may see your good works and give glory to you?

No. Give glory to your Father who's in heaven. Right? So just like salt, the purpose is not to draw attention to ourselves. Wow, that's such a great person.

[15:02] Wow, that's such a great community. It's to draw attention to God. Man, when I'm in that community, I experience the presence of the Lord. Salt and light.

Put these two images together, and this is what Jesus is saying. The world contains darkness and decay. There are lies.

There's injustice, both immediate and personal and systemic. There's loneliness. There's exploitation. There's confusion. There's alienation. There's spiritual hunger and longing.

But Jesus has come. God in the flesh. He has lived. He has died. He has risen to set us free from sin and death, to one day renew all of creation.

And through Jesus, a new reality is emerging everywhere. The kingdom of God is growing up in our midst. And one day, the whole world is going to be renewed and look like the kingdom.

[16:05] But now there are merely glimmers of this, previews of the world to come. And God has established churches to be communities of salt and light, which are living previews of the world to come.

Right? Churches that are rooted in Christ, that are joined to one another, who together are pushing back the darkness, magnifying the ways of the kingdom, and pointing people toward Christ.

I believe that's what he has in mind. One of my favorite preachers from a bygone age used to get to this point in the sermon, and then he would say, so what?

Okay? So what? What does that mean for us? At Advent, we're looking toward the future. We're looking toward where we're going from this day on.

And if you're going to be a part of this ride and a part of this movement, which I hope and pray you are, every single one of you, what does this mean for us? And I would say this morning, we're just going to focus on one central application.

[17:12] But I think it's one that merits a lot of thought and prayer coming out of today as we go into our week, month, year. If we're going to be salt and light, it simply means this.

It means having the courage to be different. It means having the courage to be different. You know, Jesus warns his disciples against losing their saltiness and against hiding their light under a bowl. And what he's saying is he's calling us to be openly and noticeably publicly different from the people around us. So he's saying that as Christians, being different, you know, not fitting in is essential to what we have to offer the world.

And I don't know, maybe it's just where I am, stage of life, age, you know, like I just turned 49, I'm on the cusp of 50. And you just think about things differently at this stage than I did when I was 20 or 30.

And I just, I think one of the things that I'm just kind of tired of and done with is caring about fitting in. You just get to the point where you're just tired of it. Because you've had enough experiences of realizing that no matter what I say or do, no matter how hard I try, there are going to be some people that respond positively and there are some people who don't.

[18:29] And really very little of it has to do with us, me, you, right? Mostly has to do with whatever's going on inside that person, right? So Jesus is saying, stop trying to fit in.

When we look at the past hundred years in the life of our country, I would say that, yes, the church has gotten it wrong in many ways.

And there are a lot of ways that abuses of power and scandals and all of that have done enormous damage. And there are, in other times and places, we talk about that and we address it openly. It's

very true.

But one of the things that doesn't get talked about enough is the amount of damage that has been done by flavorless Christianity. flavorless Christianity. I'm talking about that lukewarm, watered down, scrambling to fit in, scrambling to keep up.

I think that when people encounter, when people are genuinely spiritually hungry and they are longing for something different, for something more, and their first encounter with Christianity and Christian community is a kind of flavorless, watered down example of it, I think that oftentimes that does the damage of inoculating them against the real thing.

[19 : 43] I think they come in and they experience it and they say, well, I thought there was something more here, but you're just kind of like a generic version of what I'm already seeing out here. It's just, it's kind of the same, but it's like not even done as well.

You know? And so they just said, well, I guess I'll keep looking. And I don't know how many untold thousands of people have had that experience, but I know enough of them and I've heard enough of their stories to say it's probably underestimating to say it was merely thousands.

I actually think, and this is actually true if you look at the statistics and the research that's coming out now, just in the last two or three years, I think that there's a groundswell of people who would not necessarily consider themselves to be churchgoing or religious people who are longing for something different.

They're wanting a true alternative to what they see and experience in the secular world. They're hungry for something. And imagine if they come into a community where there is a kind of a white hot faith, where people are all in.

Imagine what that says to that person. It says, your instinct and your desire to look for something, the thing that you're looking for is real and true, and this is what people look like who have found it.

[21 : 02] And I think that this kind of hunger for an alternative is evident everywhere. You know, I'll pick an example that I know is relevant because it's an area where I think many Christians are most tempted to hide and to compromise, and that's in the realm of how we think about marriage and sexuality.

Just to say that makes Christians cringe, right? And it's because for decades, many people have dismissed the Christian vision of sex, and what I'm talking about is the idea that sex is something that is meant to be experienced within the context of a lifelong covenant, right?

And so for decades, this has been dismissed by the broader culture as being outdated, as being oppressive. And so as Christians, and as somebody who sort of came to faith right around the turn of the century, right around the year 99, 2000, you know, believing this kind of thing just felt crazy. It felt like you were, and that was a long time ago, right? And so as Christians, it's so easy to feel embarrassed of this and ashamed of it and to want to make sure people know, yeah, I'm a Christian, but I'm not that kind of Christian who still believes in that stuff, right?

Something interesting is happening in our culture right now, right? Because the sexual liberation movement happened, and it was ostensibly a liberation from all of these oppressive norms.

[22 : 27] But we've gotten enough distance from that movement now in 2026, looking back, that there are a lot of people beginning to question, what were we actually doing there, and was it any better?

We've lived with the consequences of the sexual revolution for long enough that we see more and more feminist writers who are reconsidering modern sexual ethics altogether. So I'm thinking of people like Mary Harrington or Louise Perry, right?

When Louise Perry wrote her book, I think it was published in like 2022, she wrote *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, and at the time she was a secular progressive feminist. She had worked in a rape crisis center, and her experiences and her research led her to actually argue that sexual liberation has overwhelmingly failed women.

Because she says, and this is her argument, when consent becomes the only moral standard, when we stop asking other questions like, is this loving?

Is there an imbalance of power that is created in these kinds of relationships? When we ask, who actually bears the physical and emotional risks in a consent-based relationship?

[23 : 45] Or does this produce commitment, or does this ethic actually make it easier to use and discard people? Right? Does it take the consumerism that is so prevalent in our culture already and redefine our most important valuable relationships through the lens of consumerism?

Right? So Perry concludes in her book, she says, you know who is really on to something? The Christians. Right? This historic ethic of covenantal lifelong partnership was historically, she says, a radical and stabilizing victory for women.

It restrained male power in a society where men were dominant. Right? It required fidelity from both sexes. It bound sex to commitment and provided enormous protection primarily for the most vulnerable, women and children.

And so she says, you know, I think they were on to something. I think we should maybe consider going back to something like that. Right? Now this is just one example. This is not a sermon on sexual ethics. But it's just one example that shows us that we are harboring and holding on to something that is extremely beautiful and extremely valuable when we talk about the vision of human life and flourishing that we have as followers of Jesus.

And I'm telling you this, we have not always gotten that right. We have messed that up many, many, many times. But what we have been given, what has been entrusted to us, that is something that the world desperately needs even if they don't always recognize it.

[25 : 30] So the point is not to have the courage to be different only when people like Louise Perry say it's cool. The point is we have to have the courage to be different even if the world doesn't always recognize the value in that difference.

Because it is valuable regardless of that. Right? So what does this mean for us moving forward? I just want to offer a few ways that this becomes practical and actionable.

The first thing I would encourage you to do is simply to take some time to examine where you have maybe quietly adopted values of the surrounding culture.

Areas where you may feel like you have in your life more recently began to lose your saltiness. It could be in the way we think about money.

It could be in our relationship to our pursuit of success. It could be in the area of sexuality. It could be in how you engage politics and engage with or refuse to engage with people who believe very different things.

[26 : 39] It could be in status. You know, when you're 20, it's easy to say status doesn't matter. But when you're fairly successful and in your middle life, maybe it does.

It could be in how you think about your enemies. You know, where are you following the crowd versus following Jesus? That's the first thing. Number two, I would say this makes it absolutely clear that every single person in this room, myself included, we need strong Christian community.

We need friendships. We need brothers and sisters who can encourage us, who can challenge us to live differently. You know, faithfulness is pretty difficult when we're isolated.

Remember those National Geographic shows where you see like a herd of gazelle and then there's like one gazelle that's like off on the other side of the screen and there's like three lions chasing that one gazelle, right?

Whenever I hear somebody say, yeah, I follow Jesus, but I'm just not really sure I'm ready to be part of a church right now. I'm like, you're a gazelle and you don't know it. You know, right? We're not designed to do that alone, right?

[27 : 48] So the lions look for the gazelle that's not part of the herd, right? And that's the target, right? So if you're not meaningfully engaged in a church, you've got a target on your back, right? And what is that verse in Genesis?

Satan is crouching like a hungry lion at your door, right? Christians need community. We need people in our lives. And there are a lot of ways to get involved here.

If you're a part of our church, you need to be a part of a small group or core group. You absolutely have to. And those are launching right now. You need to be engaged in serving in some way because being in a church as someone who is a stakeholder, contributing to the good of the whole, if you've never had that relationship with the church, it's a completely different experience.

It's the kind of like, you know, the sort of secret sauce for getting to know people in the church is to get involved and serve. And you should really prayerfully consider committing and becoming a member.

If you don't have, if you have thoughts or reservations about becoming a member, come talk to me, come talk to Hillary. We'll answer whatever questions or concerns you have. You should become a member. You should commit because you need a church in your life.

[29 : 00] Number three, being salt and light, having the courage to be different, this means that we have to practice our conviction without contempt. Being different does not require being angry or

defensive or unkind.

Sometimes people preach the gospel and they are so incredibly offensive and hurtful in the way they do it to certain groups, right? And you say, you don't need to be offensive.

And they say, well, the gospel is inherently offensive. And it's like, yeah, the gospel is inherently offensive, but you're also inherently offensive, right? And you need to stop. So being different does not require being angry or defensive or unkind.

So you can hold, and some of you model this so beautifully. I mean, I've seen you do this. You can hold firmly to the truth while at the same time listening carefully and welcoming generously and treating people with dignity, right?

This church is committed to civil discourse. We are committed to learning how to explore our differences with mutual respect and dignity. In fact, we had a series of events before COVID that I'd like to restart called Common Cup where we actually invited people in, had contentious conversations about very polarizing topics like gentrification or nationalism versus patriotism.

[30:19] And then we would, at the end of the night, after a good, robust argument, take communion together because our unity comes through Christ and not through agreeing on policy, right?

Finally, being salt and light, having the courage to be different, means that our distinctiveness must encompass our whole lives. It should be evident in our integrity at work, in our generosity with money, in our care for the vulnerable, in our faithfulness in relationships, in our willingness to forgive our enemies, in our willingness to sacrifice for the sake of others.

So I encourage you to pray about that this week. This is part of our DNA. This is who we are. This is where we're going. So ask yourself, where am I compromising out of a desire to fit in and what would faithful obedience look like?

And remember, the goal is not to be different merely for the sake of being different. It's to become more like Jesus and to bear witness to Him. Let's pray. Lord, we know that even as we say these things, they're not possible apart from You, that it is Your grace that changes hearts and Your grace alone.

And so we pray, Lord, as we come before You, as we confess our faith, as we petition You in prayer, as we confess our sin, as we gather around Your table, and as we receive Your body and blood.

[31:46] Lord, we pray that You would turn these hearts of stone into flesh. We pray that You would plant Your Word deeply in us. We pray that we would, by Your grace, live lives that glorify and reflect who You are.

We pray this in Your Son's name. Amen.