

## Looking Forward

Sermon, Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, February 6, 2011

Grace Episcopal Church, Elmira, NY

Deacon Daisy Kirkpatrick

*Isaiah 58:1-12, Psalm 112:1-10, I Corinthians 2:1-16, Matthew 5:13-20*

I have been so sad. People that I know and care about are unhappy and hurting. Our meeting last week was very difficult and many people have come away confused and distressed. This is a time of change for us, and, hopefully, also a time of reconciliation.

Grace Church has been a place of healing for me – twice. When I first came here five years ago I had been shattered by a series of unfortunate situations. You supported me and allowed me the time and space to heal my brokenness. Then three years ago you helped me recover from a major disappointment. I hope that all of us, both as a Church and as individuals, can offer that healing time and space to our distressed brothers and sisters.

Today the choir will sing “Ye were sometimes in darkness,” a wonderful anthem by Randall Thompson. Listen to the words and allow the music to speak to you. The words are, “For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord, walk as children of light.”<sup>1</sup>

The Bible is the source of our guidance in good times and bad; it has been translated into English many times. The words I just quoted were from the King James Version written in the language of the time of Queen Elizabeth I. Every translation requires a balance between what the literal text says versus current English usage. The New Revised Standard Version, which is the translation that we use here at Grace, tends toward a more literal rendering of the text. Eugene Peterson, a Presbyterian pastor and Biblical scholar made the translation of the Bible known as *The Message*. His primary goal was to capture the tone and conversational feel of the original text in contemporary English. It is a very free translation but speaks very directly to us.

For instance, let’s look at a verse from Second Corinthians. In the New Revised Standard Version it reads like this: “We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God’s word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.”<sup>2</sup> Peterson translates the same verse: “We don't maneuver and manipulate behind the scenes. And we don't twist God's Word to suit ourselves. Rather we keep everything we do and say out in the open, the whole truth on display, so that those who want to can see and judge for themselves in the presence of God.”

When I started this sermon, I had planned some commentary on the parts of the Gospel passage about salt and light. But I find that the words from *The Message* are so clear that they need no further explanation.

Jesus says: "Let me tell you why you are here. You are 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

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 5:8 King James Version

<sup>2</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:2

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.”<sup>3</sup>

Today's passage from Isaiah sums up today's teaching. Here is what he says, again from *The Message* translation:

What I'm interested in seeing you do is:  
 sharing your food with the hungry,  
 inviting the homeless poor into your homes,  
 putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad,  
 being available to your own families.  
 Do this and the lights will turn on,  
 and your lives will turn around at once.  
 Your righteousness will pave your way.  
 The God of glory will secure your passage.  
 Then when you pray, God will answer.  
 You'll call out for help and [he will] say, 'Here I am.'

If you get rid of unfair practices,  
 quit blaming victims,  
 quit gossiping about other people's sins,  
 if you are generous with the hungry  
 and start giving yourselves to the down-and-out,  
 your lives will begin to glow in the darkness,  
 your shadowed lives will be bathed in sunlight.  
 [The Lord] will always show you where to go.  
 [He will] give you a full life in the emptiest of places—  
 firm muscles, [and] strong bones.  
 [You will] be like a well-watered garden,  
 a gurgling spring that never runs dry.  
 [You will] use the old rubble of past lives to build anew,  
 [to] rebuild the foundations from out of your past.  
 [You will] be known as those who can fix anything,  
 restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate, [and]  
 make the community livable again.<sup>4</sup>

And now to Him whose Power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine, to Him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus, forever and ever. Amen.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 5:13-16, *The Message*

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 58:7-12, *The Message*

<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 3:20-21