

FOR GOD'S SAKE

Why be Christian? What's the point, the goal, the purpose? Why believe in Jesus? Why trust Jesus? Why follow Jesus? Why worship God? Why pray? Why hear and study God's word? Why baptize? Why commune? What do you get out of it? What good does it do you?

In our reading from the prophet Isaiah the people ask such a question: "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" They had an idea why they troubled themselves to worship God, to fast, to pray, to give offerings. They figured it was a religious exchange system. **If** we circumcise, sacrifice, fast, worship, and the like, **then** God will save. An **If-Then** system of theology. Do this and that and then God will reward. Let us show God how religious we are, then God will love us. Why believe in Jesus, why be Christian? In order to go to heaven, right? That's the standard answer. That's how religion works, right? Be a Christian, get baptized, go to church (at least sometime), in order to avoid going to hell and instead go to heaven.

God has a very different notion about faith and religion, worship, fasting and the like. It's all about doing good, changing the world for better, restoring creation to the way God intends, healing what is broken, forgiving sin, reconciling those who are alienated and at war with one another, making peace. As far as I can tell, it's about loving the LORD our God and our neighbors as ourselves. That's what Jesus says, right? I never hear Jesus say, "Do you want to save your skin from going to hell, then believe in me." In fact, I never hear Jesus say that being Christian is all about me, about getting something—tit-for-tat or *quid pro quo*. What I hear is less *If-Then* and more *Because-Therefore*. Because I the LORD your God am holy, therefore you shall be holy. Because I have loved you, therefore you are to love one another—We love because God first loved us. Because I gave of myself completely, my whole life, even unto death on a cross, therefore you shall live your life as an offering—for God's sake. — BLESSED TO BE A BLESSING —

Some people hear that as law and order, that is, as legalism. God's just ordering us around. Well, it can become that, especially in the *If-Then* form of theology. Do this, do that and then you get your reward. But I don't hear it that way. I hear it this way:

You are the salt of the earth. . . . You are the light of the world.

Jesus doesn't say, "If you are good enough, holy enough, religious enough and try hard enough, then you are the salt of the earth, then you will finally become the light of the world." He says, "You are, for God's sake, the salt of the earth. You are, for God's sake, the light of the world."

It all starts at Baptism. Last Sunday, Pastor Lisa mentioned that in the catechumenate process of the early Church, when over the course of a couple of years, people prepared to be baptized, to be made Christians, born anew by God through the waters of baptism, that Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount* was key to the instruction for what it means to be Christian. It's a way of life, friends. A way of living in this world. It is not a bartering system for how to get to heaven. God is not a merchant God, keeping the books, tallying the debits and credits to see if in the end we make it into heaven. Because God is God, and the LORD God cares for the widow, orphan, poor, oppressed, the last, least, lost and little; therefore, we care in the way God cares. That's what it means to love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. It means loving your neighbor as yourself. That's what it means—because-therefore.

For God's sake we are the salt of the earth. For God's sake we are the light of the world. Jesus says so. Being Christian is not about getting something. It's about being someone — being who we are.

You are the salt of the earth—salty saints, so flavor this world, make a difference, bring healing to wounds, season, purify, preserve. You are the light of the world. Shine, scatter the darkness, chase it away. Burn brightly. Let your light shine before others, doing good, doing justice, so that the world gives God glory, for God's sake. Because you are salt, because you are light—be who you are!

So, those early Christians being baptized were salted. Yes, they were salted—their tongues tasting who they were in this world. Also, they were lighted. As today we give a candle to the newly baptized, so they did of old, so that the dark baptistery, early on Easter, just before sunrise, became light with the burning candles of Christians—the candles saying to them, You are the light of the world.

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.

So, here we are on the mount, Jesus teaching us what it is to live as God's blessed people. Just before this mountain sermon, before he called his first followers to leave their fishing nets behind, Jesus came on the scene and said, "Repent, turn around, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." God's kingdom is here and now. You are servants of God's kingdom, ambassadors, ministers of God's COVENANT. I'm here to renew that Covenant, to fulfill the LAW and the PROPHETS. Pay attention. This is the way of life for you, for God's sake. You've come with me through the baptism waters. Through trials and temptations you've turned your back on the world's way of wealth, power, wisdom, and you've come with me up the mountain for this time of Epiphany, for God to shine on us. Blessed are you—all you poor and hungry, meek and lowly, mourning the world's brokenness, hungering and thirsting for God's goodness to make things right, to do justice and make peace—blessed are you. Here are some tools for your journey. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. For God's sake be salty, shine brightly, that what you do, how you live gives glory to God. The law and the prophets point the way to go. You've got what you need. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. For God's sake you are ambassadors of God's kingdom and ministers of God's covenant. Because I the LORD your God am holy, therefore you shall be holy. Because I have loved you, therefore you are to love one another. For God's sake, beloved, be who you are. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

To God Alone Be Glory.

Amen.