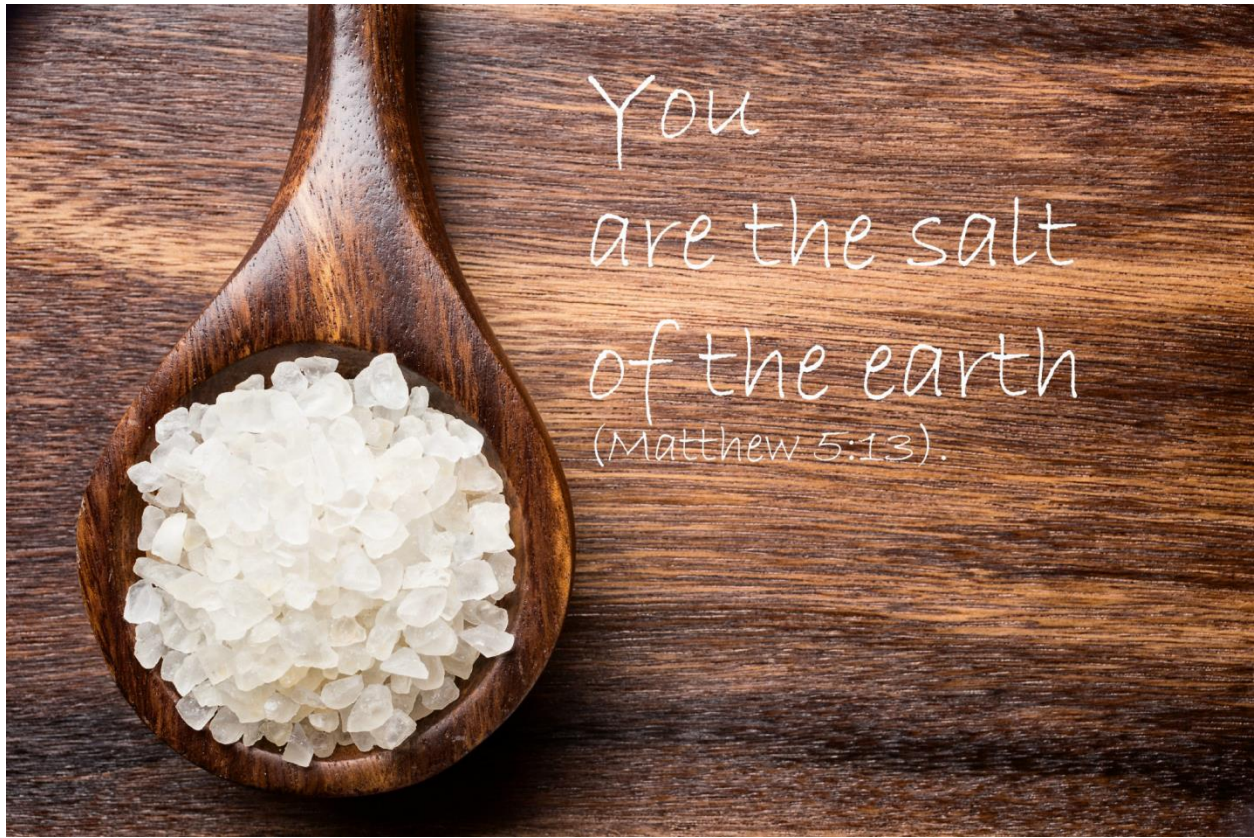


Sermon, February 5, 2023
Isaiah 58:1-9; Matthew 5:13-20
“Thru the Water: Live Boldly”
Rev. Dr. Brian Jones, Senior Pastor



It was one of the great medical mysteries of its time. The Bubonic plague ravaged Western Eurasia and Northern Africa from 1346 to 1353 or so. Estimates on how many people died during that plague are hard to tabulate. But it's believed that the plague alone in Europe may have been responsible for the deaths of 25 million people. It may have contributed to the death of over 200 million people. This might help, the 25 million who died directly by the plague was approximate one third of the populace of that continent at that time. Europe did not regain its population numbers until around 1500. It was the deadliest plague known to mankind.

And of course much research over the hundreds of years have been put into what caused it, where it came from, why it began and why it stopped. How to prevent it, all of those sorts of things. And one of the

things they did in their historical research was to look for the places where it hit the hardest. Obviously, higher populations, worse sanitary condition all contribute to the mass loss of life.

But here is where the mystery comes in. In their research, the scientists found there were places where the death rates were lower. Now, yes, you could assume in less populated places that would happen, but these researchers found that there were places where even in large cities, even when death was all around them, certain areas or neighborhoods where, while the incidents of the plague was as high as anywhere else, death was not.

They wonder *what have we discovered?* Is there perhaps something, the people ate something, they did some condition we don't know of that kept the people alive? They began to do copious amounts of research into trying to find out just what it was that made the difference. Also, they could not find anything. There was no difference in where people died and where they lived. Why would these people in this neighborhood live when the surrounding areas were deadly? There seemed to be a cause.

But then one day, one of the researchers began to notice something they had missed, hadn't even thought of it as a factor. But there it was. They looked at other neighborhoods again, this phenomena happened again and again and again. They had found it. Any guesses? It was a church. Anytime they found an area where the death rate was lower, there was a church in its epicenter.

The answer as to why the church being in that area lowered the death rate? Care. While everyone closed their doors and let the people around them die, the church opened their doors and fed people. They gave them water, they took care of people, they encouraged their congregation to do the same. What they found was that when simple care is given, when people are taken care of, they live longer, even in adverse conditions. Oh, it doesn't take it all away, but it made a difference. So in the end, the great mystery was solved, apparently having a group of Christians living as Christians in your area makes a huge difference in the quality of one's life.

We continue our look at what I like to think of as living the baptized life. As Christians, we have gone through the water of redemption, our old life is behind us and we are living a new life. We have talked for several weeks that it is God moving in us to bring us into that new life. I hope this will help us to look at baptism anytime we do one in a new way. I also hope it helps us look at our own lives in a new and different way.

What does it mean to live the baptized life, to go through the waters? Well, let's go back to the Gospel lesson read a few moments ago. This is a part of the Sermon on the Mount. It comes right after the Beatitudes which we looked at last week. This is what it means to live the blessed life, Jesus said. But then He says when you do this, you are transformed, and you will become salt and light. What does Jesus mean

that we are salt and light? Note that He doesn't say you will become salt and light or you can aspire to it. Jesus says you are, when you became My disciple, you became salt and light. So what does it mean to be salt and light? It means to be exactly what those scientists discovered about the church in the midst of the plague, apparently having Christians or a Christian community in your midst will make all the difference in the world to the quality of ones' life.

Let's take a moment and think about this. Because it's in many ways a concept we don't always grasp in the church. When we accept Christ, much of our spiritual growth is, to be honest, a bit self-centered. We become Christians because we want go to heaven, we want to let go of sin, we want healing, we want joy. We accept it because it's truth. But Jesus says we must become disciples not only for our benefit but for the world around us. Your living the Christian life, following Jesus, isn't just about you. It's about the fact the world needs you in it, the world is made better by the presence of the church.

This is why Jesus says we are the salt of the earth. Salt preserves. The original readers of the Sermon on the Mount would know this. The fish caught in the sea of Galilee were shipped all over the Roman World. Packed in barrels of, you guessed it, salt. Why? To preserve them. We are to preserve the world around us. If you think the world is in a bad place, think for a moment what the world would be like if there were no Christians. The hospitals, the schools, the missions, the aid to neighbors, the prayers not being lifted, no one to say life can be better, no one living a transformed life. We follow Jesus not just for us, but for the benefit of those around us.

So, too, we are to be light. How do people know that Jesus rose from the dead, that He is real and true? By how you live. Our lives, Jesus says, how we live more than our argument, will convince people of the truth of the Gospels. Yes, I believe the Bible is true because I studied it; yes, I believe Jesus is true because I have met Him. But I first believed He was true because I encountered Him in someone else. And I imagine my story is not unique. I imagine if you look back, that's your story, as well.

So here is my question. How are you doing? If you are to be salt and light, how are you doing? That's an important question. Because salt can lose its saltiness. Lights can be covered and extinguished. As you follow Christ, are you being salt and light to the world around you? Is the world preserved because you are in it?

Let's look at it in small ways. Is your family's life better because you are in it? Are you preserving them with the salt of your faith? That's your role. As you got to work, is the quality of their life better because you as a Christian are in their lives and work with them? Have you preserved them, made the community, your neighborhood, better? Your spouse? Am I preserving them for the Kingdom of God?

Salt also has another property. It makes things taste better. It can make bland food magical and palatable. But salt does it not by overwhelming with saltiness, but because it enhances the natural good flavor it brings it out in the food. Do you do that? Does being around you bring out the goodness in other people. Have you lived your life in such a way that just makes others' lives better and brings out the goodness in them? Or have you left a sour taste in someone's mouth?

That's been my prayer as I prepared this message and prayed over it this week. Lord, let me be salt and light. May every place I'm in be better and preserved because I was here. May someone encounter Jesus in me maybe for the first time. May I make the lives of others better and bring out their goodness. Have you been salt and light? And will you be today? Amen.