

“The City on a Hill”
Matthew 5:13-20, Isaiah 58:1-12
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I've been thinking a lot lately about a trip we took to Israel and Palestine six years ago. In this lectionary cycle of Scripture lessons for this year, we are considering the Gospel of Matthew, and many of the places that we visited when we went to the Holy Land a few years ago were places that Matthew speaks about. One of them was even the hill on which Jesus was said to have delivered the Sermon on the Mount. But it is another hill that I am most interested in today. The hill with a city on it.

During the very first part of our trip to the Holy Land, we were visiting sites in the north of the country around the Sea of Galilee—which is just a big lake actually—Lake Michigan is far bigger. Anyway on one of our first days we visited an ancient archeological site called Megiddo. Megiddo sits at the head of a very large valley. It was a very important city in ancient times guarding the trade route from Egypt to Mesopotamia and was inhabited beginning about 7000 years BC. It was destroyed by the Babylonians long before Jesus but in the New Testament they speak of the Mount of Megiddo or “Har Megiddo” or in Greek “Armageddon.” The valley that Megiddo overlooks, the Valley of Jezreel was considered to be so large and so broad that all the armies of the world could fit within it. As we were walking through the ruins of Megiddo we looked across that valley there was an obvious city on a hill in the distance and so I asked our guide what city that was. “Nazareth,” she said. And it made me think about that city that Jesus grew up in. A city on a hill?

Well, probably not. When we went to visit Nazareth the next day we certainly experienced a vibrant city on a hill but as our guide explained to us, during Jesus time, Nazareth wasn't that way. It was a small collection of houses, mainly built out of caves in the hill. It was a real

nothing town, home to about 3 or 4 hundred people. So where was this city on a hill? The next day we drove to another archeological site, about five miles away from Nazareth, a city up on a hill. There's no city there today, but during the time of Jesus, this city, the city of Sepphoris would have been a shining city on a hill. This city, never mentioned in the Bible, was the capital of Galilee during the period and is called the "jewel of the Galilee." There were extensive building programs going on there during the early years of the first century and it is not too big of a stretch to think that Jesus and his father Joseph would have found an easier time getting work there than in the poor community of Nazareth. Would the young man Jesus have walked the five miles from Nazareth, walked up the hill to this new shining city of Sepphoris, in order to find work? Did he walk up that hill so many days seeing this city and then walk home to his poor city of Nazareth, and the comparison between the two cities was imprinted in his mind? The city on a hill. That's what Jesus said we are. When he says "You are the light of the world," the word "you" is plural: he means all of us together. We're the light. We're the city on the hill. Notice that he does not say, we should try hard to be like a city on a hill. We should try really hard to be the light of the world, to give light to dark places around us. In these verses Jesus uses the same kind of language he used in the Beatitudes, he does not tell us what we should be, he informs us what we are. We are the light of the world. Today is a good day to think about what kind of light we have been. How have we been the light of the world this year? Is there a dark place in the world, in our community, in the life of another, in our own hearts, to which we have helped to bring light? Jesus says we are the light of the world—we are here to bring light to a dark and broken world. In Jesus day that city on the hill drew people toward it. Do we? Archbishop William Temple was fond of saying, "The church is the only organization on earth that exists for those who are not its members." Have we been shining into dark places?

As wonderful as our trip to the Holy Land was, it was also disturbing and you will hear much about those experiences as well. It was upsetting to visit Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum and to reflect on how during that period and for much of Christian history, darkness increased because of the way Christians treated our Jewish brothers and sisters. It was upsetting to travel in the West Bank and see that land divided and listen to those who have no real hope of a peaceful solution. Where is the Christian church now? Are we providing light and warmth and hope? One of our last days there we visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the traditional site of the empty tomb. We were inspired by the Sunday morning worship there of the Armenian Orthodox, and of the Coptic Christians and by listening to the gospel in Arabic from the Syrian Orthodox Christians as they worshiped. But it is also strange that they each have their separate spaces and times because they cannot worship together. Is that a sign of hope that they can coexist peacefully, even if they do it separately, or does Jesus weep when his church is fractured like this?

Are you uncomfortable yet? We also read today from the prophet Isaiah who has called God's people to be a light to the nations. Are we? Isaiah tells us that it all depends on how well we care for those who are hurting. Most cities in the United States have more churches than gas stations. What does this say to the people around us? Do we spend more time worrying about how entertaining our worship style is than about the poor? Do we spend more on our building than on feeding the hungry? Do we try so hard to not be political that we become wishy-washy? Is our town a city on a hill?

Brett Younger, professor at McAfee School of Theology in Atlanta says, "Our hometowns, however are not always good for everyone. Most cities try to hide the homeless. Prejudice makes every day more difficult for minorities. The working poor have it hard. The lack of public

transportation makes keeping a job complicated. The mentally ill fall through the cracks. The distance between the haves and the have-nots keeps growing. We know which parts of town to avoid.

For all the progress that has been made, it is still hard for women to compete for some jobs. It is difficult to be old in a society that idealizes youth. It is not easy to be single in a culture that is designed for couples. It is hard to be gay when many are quick to ostracize. Some cities are not easy places to be a stranger. Newcomers may feel as though our hometowns are clubs that are not accepting any new members. An outsider might find it hard to make the connections between what happens on Sunday morning and the many in our cities who hurt all week long.”¹

That's the message of Isaiah—not how we worship, but how we act out our worship. Not how much faith we have in God, but does our faith make a difference? A city on a hill, the light of the world is seen. And that shouldn't be comfortable. How do we be the city on the hill? How do we maintain our saltiness as the people of Christ? Jesus tells us in the passage before this—by being humble and meek, to seek after what is right, to be peacemakers, to be singleminded and pure in heart, and to rejoice even in the midst of persecution or adversity, because we are the people of Christ. We've been talking a lot about our property purchase the last few months. We bought that partially because of what we don't want it to become, to protect what we have. And we've talked some about what we do want to do with it and about beautifying that piece of land, especially as people come up Gull Road from Kalamazoo and get their first look at the village green and the church. The session vetoed my idea of a large neon sign with arrows pointing to the church right there on the corner. That's probably not what Jesus meant by being meek. But in a way, we are a city on a hill. People see us. But what do they see? When we restore that

¹ Younger, Brett. *Feasting on the Word, Year A*, vol. 1. p. 317.

house and the property, what will they see? A place that serves the community, or serves ourselves? Will it be a light giving glory to God?

But through all this I am constantly reminded of the story about the old Rabbi who once asked his students how they could tell when the night had ended and the day had begun. “Could it be,” asked one student, “when you can see an animal in the distance and tell whether it's a dog or a sheep?”

“No,” answered the rabbi.

“Another asked, “Is it when you can look at a tree in the distance and tell whether it is a fig tree or a peach tree?”

“No,” answered the rabbi.

“Then what is it?” the students demanded.

“It is when you can look on the face of any man or woman and see that it is your sister or brother. Because if you cannot see this, it is still night.”

We are the light of the world. Let it be so.