

“You are the salt of the earth.”  
(Isaiah 58.1-12; Matthew 5:13-20)

There are some weeks when you do not have to look very far to find a living scripture—in this case, a photograph that brings into focus the best that humanity has to offer. And because the image is so compelling, whenever I hear that wonderful idiom in English, “salt of the earth,” I will see the gentle face of Dr. Li, partially obscured first by a surgical mask, then by an oxygen mask. Though his mouth was covered, and his government wished to silence him, he spoke truth through the veil and warned his fellow physicians of the viral danger to come. Many of you, I suspect, have read the story of how he was hauled into a police station, warned against spreading false rumors, forced to sign an admission of guilt—even though his only crime was speaking the truth.

Dr. Li continued to practice his profession at Wuhan hospital until he eventually contracted the mysterious disease (eventually named COVID-19) himself. And on February 7, he lost his life to the illness—or rather, gave his life to his profession at the age of 34—leaving behind a five-year-old son and expectant wife. Now that the truth is out and physicians around the globe are struggling to contain the virus, even those who tried to silence him are hailing him as a hero. Many are calling for him to be honored with a state funeral.

I will not soon forget the face of Dr. Li, partially obscured but never completely silenced. And I will remember the way his life converged with these words of Scripture today: “You are the salt of the earth.” I know nothing about his religion, whether he professed Christianity, practiced Buddhism, offered incense to his ancestors as so many of my Chinese friends and relatives do. But what is crystal clear, even from 7,000 miles away, is that he was faithful to his profession. So often what creates the heroes that inspire us is not their extraordinary strength or dazzling brilliance, but rather their simple faithfulness in times of trial.

And we know many prophets, sacred and secular, who attempt to warn us of dangers to come while they work, sometimes in laboratories or hospitals, hidden from view until someone in power says, “Enough with your lies. There is no dis-ease. Our planet will go on forever in spite of your prognostications. Your panic is causing division. Things were just fine until you started making trouble.” And even after being silenced, they remain faithful in the face of derision and danger, sometimes even unto death. And when their faithfulness comes into full view, sometimes decades, even centuries after the fact, it inspires us to be faithful to what we profess.

Then again, the landscape is dotted with those who take every occasion to make a spectacle of their outrage, and one quickly grows weary of the display and increasingly deaf to strident words. Too often the usual suspects are far more willing to demonstrate than to do the hard – and often thankless – work of healing and repairing the broken world when the cameras are not rolling.

We don’t have to look very far to find those who will make their profession of faith known to all the world, especially if it promotes their own self-interest. But when no one is looking, are they repairing the world?

Today's text from Isaiah expresses the prophet's exasperation with this kind of public display. The shofar has sounded and the people have proclaimed a public fast, but a weary God turns a deaf ear to their prayers and a blind eye to their religious rites.

"Isn't this the fast that I chose," asks God through the prophet,

To let the oppressed go free and break every yoke?

To share your bread with the hungry, your homes with the homeless, to cover those who are naked, to not hide yourself from your kinfolk in need?

...to go about the sometimes thankless work of healing the broken world when no one is looking? To live ordinary lives of faithfulness wherever you find yourself?

Jesus said to those who would follow him, "You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its savor, what good is it?" It was a strange thing to say. Salt is one of the most stable minerals on earth. The only way that it can possibly lose its savor is if it is mixed with impurities — if in the face of political expediency, or the threat of opposition, or in the name of not disturbing a false peace, it becomes so tainted with other elements that it is no longer really salt. In the minds of the ancients, salt had healing and purifying power. But what good would it be if, in the course of everyday affairs, it simply retained a faint resemblance of salt but so lost its purity that it hurt instead of healed, infected instead of cured?

Real salt is hard to ignore, even when you cannot see it. Should an ocean breeze blow your way, you can taste it in the air—just as those fisher-folk of old who followed Jesus tasted it when they cast their nets out to sea. When salt comes in contact with the meal, everything changes. Should it touch a wound—long forgotten or ignored—it will sting, make its presence known, reveal what has been hidden.

When we see an example of someone who has the courage to speak the truth, to live with integrity, to remain faithful to their profession in spite of the risk involved, the sight stops us in our tracks and invites us to reflect and to pray.

"You are the salt of the earth."

When Dr. Otis Moss, one of Martin Luther King's deputies, graced our chapel with his presence a few weeks back, he invited the 900 or so gathered here to look at our own hands and then say to ourselves, "With these hands, in this place, and in my time, with the help of God, I can make a difference."

Let us pray that we may be faithful to what we profess "not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up ourselves to service, walking before God in holiness and in righteousness all our days." Amen.

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