

February 5, 2023

Year A: Epiphany V (Matthew 5:13-20)

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My first Canadian home was in northern Alberta. We took up residence in September of 1969, and over the next few months we took a LOT of pictures. And the first hundred or so are all sunsets. Fabulous, red and orange and pink and gold sunsets. Every evening we took pictures of the sunset: over the river, over the airstrip, over the church, over the flagpole, behind the truck. Every night we marvelled at the incredible beauty of the sky as the sun slipped away.

Why? Well, we were immigrants from a dull, grey, urban landscape, so we were absolutely dazzled by the beauty of Canadian sunsets. But there was another reason as well. We didn't have electricity. When the sun had gone, it was dark.

For very nearly all of human history, pretty much right up to our time, this was everybody's experience: in the daytime there is light, and when the sun goes down, it's dark. You could light a candle or a lamp for a little light, but the contrast between day and night is very dramatic when you can't just flick a switch. So these days we rarely experience the sense of complete helplessness when it's dark and there is nothing you can do about it.

We had Coleman lamps. Every room in the house had a hook in the ceiling to hold a lamp. They weren't very bright, so if you wanted to read, or work, you had to light another Coleman lamp and put it nearby. We carried them around a lot, but I don't recall ever putting a Coleman lamp under a basket. The locals already thought we were crazy for having only one dog (when everyone knows you need six for a team!), and a house with six rooms for two people, but even we wouldn't be crazy enough to light a lamp and then cover it up.

And that's the point: it's intended to sound ludicrous. Jesus was talking to people who were feeling powerless, feeling the metaphorical darkness around them, and he was saying "Come on, people! You have the light inside you. Are you going to take that precious gift – the gift that can chase away the darkness, and cover it up so that it's no use to you or anyone else?"

Covering a light with a basket doesn't put it out, but it does prevent it from doing its job. Light makes things visible that were invisible. Light chases away the darkness. Light gives life. It's supposed to do that. Why would anyone hide a light? And yet we do. The light within us was given by God. Anything that blocks the light, prevents that light from doing its job, was put there by us.

There's a story about a young lad from a devout family in a small, sheltered community who took a job with a logging crew. His pastor was very concerned about how he would get along, as a Christian in such a rough crowd. When the young man came back for vacation, the pastor asked him how it was going, and the young man said, "No need to worry pastor. They don't even know I'm a Christian. I've never done or said anything that would make them suspect it!"

Now, as Anglicans we aren't very keen on evangelizing. We don't like to be ostentatious about our faith. We prefer to do it rather than talk about it. But sometimes we worry about being conspicuous, or of being challenged. Sometimes just keep our heads down rather than risk being a Christian in a hostile world. And what's that, if it's not a hiding our light under a bushel?

In the season of Epiphany we play around with the idea of light quite a lot. Light coming into the world. Light driving away darkness. Today's passage follows after last week's: the sermon on the mount. In the first twelve verses Jesus sympathizes with the listeners for the terrible times they were suffering. He re-assures the grieving and the down-trodden and those who long for peace, that things will get better; that they are blessed even if they don't feel like it. And then he went on to tell them not to let the darkness hide their light.

The second part of the message, that we heard this morning is not "look for the light." The message this morning is "YOU ARE the light. Let it shine!" It's not about what but about what WE can do for creation. It's not about what we get; it's about what we give.

Today we are asked to let our light shine. In what we say and do; in how we deal with people; in how we share our talents and resources; in all the little ways that we can make the light shine through us, as Christians in the world.

The greatest gift that we, as Christians and as a community of Christians, can give to one another and to the world around us, is to be reflections of the light that is inside all of us. We may feel timid about it. We may even feel inadequate. We may feel that we don't have a big enough stage to work on, that what we have to offer is insignificant.

But remember that even a tiny light makes a difference. You may never know how much your kind word, or smile, or helping hand, might mean to someone else. We teach our children that, but we don't always remember the truth of it for ourselves. The song that we teach to our children doesn't say "This enormous, honking great, floodlight of mine." It says "This little light of mine." Every little light makes a difference.

The author Robert Louis Stevenson was a very sickly child, who spent years bed-ridden with poor health. One cold, winter night, when he was very ill, his nurse found him leaning up against the frosty bedroom window. He was watching the lamplighter down in the street, slowly working his way from one gas street lamp to the next, along his route, lighting the small, dim lamps. "Look at that" little Robert said. "There's a man down there poking holes in the darkness."

That's what light is for: poking holes in the darkness. One at a time. One smile. One kind word. One good deed. One gesture of helpfulness. One act of forgiving. One patient silence. Poking holes in the darkness so that the light can shine through.

Remember: "Hide it under a bushel? NO! I'm gonna let it shine!"

AMEN.