

**All Souls Episcopal Church  
Berkeley, CA  
February 5, 2017  
The Rev. Dr. Paula Nesbitt  
IS.58:1-9A 1COR.2:1-12 MT.5:13-20**

“You are the light of the world!”

The Gospel speaks to us in a very different way today, than when we heard it during Epiphany three years ago. Fresh waves of fear have been flowing across the world. Continued terrorist bombings, climate destabilization...refugees and others, not certain from one day to the next whether they will be forced back or stranded in countries where their life is in danger. Families have been split apart. Political and economic alliances are shifting, almost daily, making partnerships, planning, treaties, and relationships built on trust suddenly uncertain. There are also generalized fears of the unknown: will civil rights and freedoms be revoked, will democracy and civil society break down? What will happen before we hear this gospel again?

For my best friend of 40 years, who supported the recent political change in Washington, there are many fears as well: will the change she had hoped for go too far? Will others who disagree ask about her views? What should she say? Would they *really* listen and not just condemn her? Would she lose me as her long-standing friend?

Fear like a fog threatens to snuff out the light of the world...if we let it.

Jesus was speaking to his disciples during a difficult and fearful time as well—a despotic Jewish ruler under a despotic Roman regime, widespread anxiety over the future, and a deep longing for messianic salvation. The disciples, drawn from the countryside, yet touched by the light--the hope--they sensed in Jesus, were still struggling to make sense of his teachings...and who he was.

They undoubtedly felt the resonance of Jesus words with the prophecy of Isaiah, but Jesus was bringing it to life in a fresh—and very personal--way. For Isaiah, Israel was to be a light to all nations, not in an elitist way but to bring God’s message of peace and reconciliation to all. Light is a harbinger of god’s love and yearning for reconciliation. Jesus personalizes this, calling his disciples the light of the world, implying that their belief in what he is teaching and following it with absolute love in their heart, will manifest the light of Christ to the world.

Yet for both Isaiah and Jesus, the light of God’s message was intertwined and contrasted with the human temptation toward hypocrisy. How easily the Law could be interpreted or manipulated to fulfill its requisites...yet subvert its intention, in ways that supported elitism, self-interest, oppression or exclusion of others. Hypocrisy builds barriers, and ultimately breeds cynicism and alienation that crowds out the possibility of love and reconciliation.

Hypocrisy, espousing one thing but doing another, is an easy trap for all of us. Sometimes it’s calculated and deliberate, but more easily we can let ourselves get swept into it. For me, whenever I start feeling self-righteous about something—whether it’s a viewpoint or a cause or an action I’ve taken—there’s likely something important I have overlooked.

The light of truth can be embarrassing and humbling, but also life-giving. As things come to light, also comes the possibility of change, and moving into right relationship with the truth...and with others.

Second, the light of truth cuts through the shroud of generalized fear and anxiety that can accompany deception and hypocrisy. In times of anxiety and fear, all sorts of voices rise to the surface to proclaim theirs as the right way forward. Charismatic leaders, drawing on sociologist Max Weber's use of the term, gain traction in times of anxiety, alienation and change. Some voices may be prophetic, drawing us toward justice, grounded in gospel understandings of god's love and reconciliation, such as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Others voices may take us in other directions. From religious movements I have studied over the years, those that have tended to grow violent and destructive typically were accompanied by fear, anxiety, and high tension, which not only makes it difficult to hear other viewpoints, but also served to create clear boundaries of "us and them" that cut off relationships, belittling or dehumanizing the "other" in the process. This kind of voice was exactly what Jesus was seeking to break down.

Admittedly, many of us may struggle with moments of anger, fear, and deep anxiety over the new direction our country is taking. I do. Some have said that it feels like more than just a change in political leadership. The very institutions they had taken for granted now seem so fragile...and vulnerable. And yet perhaps others had felt this way during some of the rapid social changes over the last several years, changes that I and others had celebrated. This is perhaps where deeper conversation and understanding across our differences of view might shed some light.

More than ever I believe that we must be a light, to witness to what we understand the Gospel to be, but also be ready to listen to the hard truths of others, who think differently. This is essential for our social creativity in finding ways to live together peaceably amid our differences. For if in our anger, fear, or protest we fall short of this, we risk becoming the very thing we seek to avoid.

A few years ago, when I was doing field research for the Anglican Communion's Continuing Indaba project, I observed groups from various cultures and viewpoints interact and converse together. Relationships were built across profound differences, and more than once I heard someone earnestly express regret that another was going to hell because of being an ordained woman or a gay man. They liked the individuals in question...and were genuinely sorry that this was the truth they believed. What made relationship possible was that both recognized that God's wisdom was greater than theirs, and that it ultimately was God who would pass judgment. Meanwhile, they let their friendships grow...and found ways they could work together.

Being a light to the world is our purpose, as a people of faith, individually and collectively. In all our actions, we need to keep love of God and one another in the foreground. Yet love is a complicated emotion; it doesn't mean condoning injustice or denying who we are or what we believe to be right, but it must maintain an awareness of another's fundamental humanity.

One of the big concerns in the aftermath of World War II was how so many Christian churches and citizens didn't take seriously the Nazi agenda and stand against the atrocities and inhumanities it sought to commit, especially as it evolved toward an ever more autocratic and violent end. Many who did, such as the Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, paid with their lives. Bonhoeffer has been a light to the world through his witness against evil, but also in his commitment to Christ's call to love. As he wrote in his letters and papers from prison, "May God in his mercy lead us through these times; but above all,

may he lead us to himself.”<sup>1</sup>

We all have different gifts, experiences, passions, and understandings, different ways to express the light of Christ in the world. Each of us, in our own way, must seek to make a difference, to be a light to the world, tempered by loving God and loving those we might seek to avoid or disagree with. We must draw upon our passion but not let it consume our compassion. We also must guard against assuming a sense of self-importance, or that it is about us.

What does being a light to the world mean for each of us?

Tamara, a middle-aged bookkeeper in a rural area, over the past few months had felt uneasy about the political election, and tried to ignore her concerns the best she could. Until her daughter asked her to take part with her in the women’s march in Seattle. She had been concerned about her daughter’s future, who was a young professional in a male dominated occupation...and who also was gay. Afterward, she said that it had been life-changing. She didn’t agree with all of the messages on the signs that marchers carried, but she was amazed at how it felt to be part of a group that was taking a stand. By taking part she felt better able to explain her views and concerns to others she knew who had disagreed with the march.

For my best friend, being a light to the world has meant being willing to listen with compassion and understanding to others who are deeply pained by the changes taking place, even though she doesn’t share those same concerns. Over the years, she and I both have learned that we are richer for our friendship across our significant differences of view. Her Conservative Baptist faith and my Episcopal faith meet in our shared belief in God’s love.

More than ever we need to be a light to the world. Whether we are called to witness to social justice, or to listen and care for one another with compassion across our many differences, we must be mindful of doing so with humility. Righteousness, being in right relationship with God, means letting the reconciling light of Christ shine through us, so that all our actions and intentions are grounded in God’s reconciling love.

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<sup>1</sup> — [Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters Papers from Prison](http://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/1153999-widerstand-und-ergebung-briefe-und-aufzeichnungen-aus-der-haft) <http://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/1153999-widerstand-und-ergebung-briefe-und-aufzeichnungen-aus-der-haft>