

The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany - Year A - The Rev. Jennifer B. Cleveland –Feb. 5, 2023

Isaiah 58:1-9a (9b-12), Psalm 112:1-9, 1 Corinthians 2:1-12 (13-16), Matthew 5:13-20

Yesterday, the Vestry spent the day in retreat, planning for the year ahead. For the first part of the day, we went on a pilgrimage. The pilgrimage did not cover a lot of miles - it was here at the church. But what we did was walk the rounds - the expanse of indoor and outdoor places. We paused at many different places to reflect on what we saw and observed, wondered about and were inspired by. Our guiding scripture passage was the burning bush, when God refers to the place where Moses was standing, tending to his father-in-law's flock of sheep, as holy ground. That story begins with Moses walking out and, upon noticing the burning bush, stepping aside. It is only when Moses steps aside to take a closer look that God speaks to him or that he hears God speak. And his life's work began.

As we took this pilgrimage round and through this holy ground, inside and out, we spent time noticing. What is appealing? How are our senses engaged? We walked outside and inside, upstairs and down, around the building and out to the spreading garden, through the hallway and into the kitchen, downstairs to the undercroft and back up through the library, paying attention to the nooks and crannies, weeds and underbrush, the open spaces and towering trees. There is so much to see! This stepping aside to go on a pilgrimage in this place—to wonder about living more fully into our call at this time, in this place—is really the call of the gospel today. Jesus says, “You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world.”

What is so appealing about these two references—salt and light—is their absolute ordinariness and availability. They are a part of each and every day - even if you are watching your salt intake! Sometimes the focus in church communities is on what and who is missing. A lack of resources. But salt and light—all of us who are here—these are resources that we have plenty of. And if *we* are the salt and light - as Jesus implies - we have all we need to pass on the zestiness of life and the warm light of love.

We have many resources beyond, but we have the main resources or ingredients right here within us. I was inspired this week by the conversations yesterday, focusing on the salt and light of this place right here, right now. I was also inspired by the choir rehearsal that was going on while we were here, filling this sanctuary and the narthex on down into Campbell Hall with song. More salt, more light. One of the zesty places here is during the week is at the Wednesday 10:00am Healing Eucharist, where the scripture readings for the saint of the day, if there is one, are used. There are a lot of women and men recognized as saints in the Episcopal Church who have feast days, so there is someone to learn about and celebrate almost every week. This past Wednesday, February 1, was St. Brigid's feast day. St. Brigid of Kildare was someone who embraced her zestiness and was a light to her local community.

Although she has long been recognized as a saint, she has *just* been recognized as a patron saint of Ireland, 2nd only to Patrick, so there is actually a new public holiday this

year in honor of her. She lived in the 5th and 6th century, dedicated her life to God when she was young and is mostly what she is known for her commitment to the poor, sick, and all those on the “outs” of society. Her date of commemoration coincides with the local Gaelic festival of Imbolc, as well, the halfway point between the winter solstice and the first day of spring, probably in part because she is often associated with the ancient Celtic goddess Brigid, the goddess of spring (a zesty season) and light. She is also known for her love of creation. In every aspect of her life, she affirmed that the sacred is to be found in our everyday, local lives, fully here, in this place. Salt and light. For her, that was in Kildare. For us, that is Freeland and South Whidbey.

Anskar was also celebrated as a saint this week, as well, on February 3. Anskar lived in the 9th century. After becoming the Archbishop of Hamburg, he was sent to Denmark and Sweden as a missionary where he is remembered as being a resounding failure, according to *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*. He worked hard, but unsuccessfully, to convert and evangelize people in Denmark. He was then called to go to Sweden where he had about as much success as he'd had in Denmark. You might wonder how he made it to sainthood. I don't know, but I celebrate his failures because they are not a measure of his zest or light that he shared with others. Other saints this week include a group of six Franciscans and twenty Japanese who were killed in the 16th century because of clashes with political powers. All of these people were salt and light in the place and time where they lived, to the people they met. Yet we know about them because of their commitment to being ordinary salt and light of God where they were.

There is a song that has been sung in churches for almost 100 years. No one knows who wrote the song, but in 1931, the song is mentioned in a newspaper in Los Angeles and in 1932, in a Missouri newspaper, and in 1933 it was being sung at an African Methodist Episcopal church conference in Montana - three very different local places across the country! This song, *This Little Light of Mine*, is based on this gospel. There are so many memorable people who have sung this song across the decades. Of course to many *This little light of mine* became a Civil Rights anthem in the 1950's and 1960's. (Check out NPR's 2018 story on the history of this song.)

The point is that living out what it means to be God's salt and light in this world—zesty and shining bright with love—is constantly being reinterpreted across time and place “to break the bonds of oppression” as the collect says or, as the prophet Isaiah says, to loose the bonds of injustice, to share food with the hungry, to seek healing.” Brigid, Anskar, the martyrs of Japan, all those who have sung “This Little Light of Mine,” Isaiah: we are in good company as we seek to be salt and light in this time, in this place.