

“Don’t Hold Back”

Isaiah 58:1-12

Matthew 5:13-16

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*This little light of mine
I’m gonna let it shine.
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Let it shine!
Let it shine!
Let it shine!*

Do any of you remember singing this song as a child, as our children have this morning? I do. I remember how my index finger suddenly became a candle; how I refused to hide it under a bushel; and how I wouldn’t let Satan *whoo!* it out. But I’m not sure that I seriously considered the trajectory of such a song, the path that was being illuminated by our singing. At such a young age, **I don’t think I knew what kind of trouble I could get into by letting that “little light of mine” shine.**

Believe it or not, I understood it better when I was eleven, and passed through the waters of baptism. In fact, it was seventeen years ago, today, at the First Baptist Church of Springfield; and I knew then that **accepting God’s call on my life, following Jesus, bearing the light of Christ was not a safe choice.** After all, Jesus was crucified. **To follow Jesus was to put my personal aspirations in jeopardy.** Throughout my college years, the signature in my emails included the lyrics of Henry Lyte (1824):

Jesus, I my cross have taken,
All to leave and follow Thee.
Destitute, despised, forsaken,
Thou from hence my all shall be.

Perish every fond ambition,
All I've sought or hoped or known.
Yet how rich is my condition!
God and heaven are still my own.

To his followers, to the baptized, to us Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth" and "You are the light of the world," conferring upon us a new identity; but, as followers of Jesus, we must remember that before we are called "salt" and "light" we are also called "blessed." "You are blessed," Jesus said, "when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:11-12). "The office of the prophet," Hauerwas says, "has now fallen on this new community, who has become salt and light for the world." The "office of the prophet" falls upon us.

One of my seminary professors would periodically remind us, almost warn us, that "Nobody *wants* to be a prophet." I could see his point. For three years, the prophet Isaiah walked the streets naked. With not so much as a sandwich board to comfort him, he served as a warning sign of the captivity that awaited Egypt (Isaiah 20:1-6). The prophet Hosea was instructed to marry a prostitute, Gomer, who broke his heart time and time again with infidelity. She sought after lovers, just as Israel sought after other gods; yet Hosea would not give up on her. His love for her was the embodiment of God's love for Israel (Hosea 1:1-11; 3:1-5). Nobody wants to be a prophet. Prophets are called out, summoned to the task. And they are who they are (with all their eccentricities). Likewise, disciples of Jesus cannot help but *be* "salt" and "light". We *are* salt and we *are* light, as Bonhoeffer said, "by the call [we] have received" from Christ, and "[we] cannot be otherwise (*The Cost of Discipleship* 116-117). Continuing the prophetic tradition as "salt of the earth" and "light of the world," our calling is no less difficult than those who have gone before us.

Just as God tells the prophet Isaiah to "Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet!" Jesus tells his disciples (he tells us) to season this bland world and illuminate its dark places by living out the good news of God's kingdom. The apostle Paul once wrote that "in the

midst of a crooked and perverse generation...[followers of Jesus] shine like stars" (Philippians 2:15). But *there are dangers* that come with this prophetic vocation.

How easy it would be to mistake this prophetic vocation for one of privilege instead of responsibility. How easy it is to proclaim truth with pride instead of humility. The prevailing image of the prophet may be that of someone shouting words of condemnation on the street corner with a deafening zeal, but such prophets are always **in danger of making themselves heard rather than God**. And God seems quick to turn a deaf ear to those who "serve [their] own interest," who divorce religion from compassion (Is. 58:4b). As followers of Jesus, the apostle Paul urges us to "look not to [our] own interests, but to the interests of others." "Let the same mind be in you," he wrote, "that was in Christ Jesus,

*who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6-8)*

Those who would seek to live as "the light of the world" and "a city on a hill" *without* the humility Christ exhibited are ultimately **in danger of fostering violence**, as they follow their own agenda and impose *their* truth and *their* way of life upon others.

On the other hand, we who seek to *imitate* Jesus' humility are **in danger of suffering persecution and death** as he was, for such character is often at odds with the violent ways of the world; and true followers of Jesus will *endure* suffering, but never *inflict* suffering.

This prophetic vocation is so perilous that many in the church simply try to opt out, relegating their faith and witness to the same pew each Sunday morning. Fear of persecution (of any kind) would have us hold

back the truth, hide our light under a bushel, and retreat into invisibility, but for Christians this is impossible. Bonhoeffer wrote that:

The followers [of Jesus] are a visible community; their discipleship [is] visible in action which lifts them out of the world—otherwise it would not be discipleship...Flight into the invisible is a denial of the call. A community of Jesus which seeks to hide itself has ceased to follow him (*The Cost of Discipleship* 117-118).

Even the people of Israel could not hide behind safe, pious practices such as fasting. To hide is to deny the call to what Bonhoeffer described as “extraordinary visibility,” whereby God is glorified. “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your **good works** and give glory to your father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

The prophetic vocation of the church is to **give glory to God** in every way possible—through sound, sight, touch, smell, and even taste. We live out this calling here in our worship together, with speech acts and singing, with greetings of peace, and with the breaking of bread and the sharing of the cup. Yet we must avoid becoming insular, as if we could limit the glory of God to these four walls. We cannot let this building become a bushel. We must let our light shine “everywhere [we] go.” Our discipleship must be “visible in action.”

We cannot hide ourselves from our brothers and sisters, especially those in need. Looking beyond what is in our own best interest, we are called to “good works”: to seek justice for the oppressed, “share [our] bread with the hungry,” “bring the homeless poor into [our] house[s],” and clothe the naked. We are to be what Christ has called us to be—salt and light—children of God. We cannot be anything less, if we are to follow Christ. And should you be afraid, consider these words from Marianne Williamson:

...**You are a child of God.** Your playing small does not serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you...**We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.** It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. **As**

we're liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

So don't hold back! Shout! Shine out! Let us be the light that we are, as fearlessly as children, Children of God! Let us be the salt that we are, and season this world with works of compassion and justice, that we might "taste and see that the LORD is good" (Psalm 34:8). Let us be what Christ has called us to be, with all humility and faithfulness, despite the dangers.

And to God be the glory! Amen.