

The Drama of Redemption

Matthew 5:13-16

August 31, 2008 10AM

Eric W. Robinson

Good morning! We have more than four people and it's Labor Day, that's pretty good. I really think the best way to start the message is to just jump into the text, so why don't we read it.

Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt loses its saltiness how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the light of the world; a city on a hill cannot be hidden, neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl - instead they put it on its stand and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way let your light shine before men that they may see your good deeds, and praise your Father in heaven. Do not think that I have come to abolish the law of the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of the pen will by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."

I want to at this point take that and put it in our back pocket for a little bit. I'm going to do a roundabout, and then we're going to come back to it; so bear with me, I promise it works out in the end.

The first thing I want to talk about is actually the Old Testament, just in a broad stroke. Another thing we might call it is the Hebrew Scriptures because it's about the Hebrew people and it was written in Hebrew. There is kind of a single event in the Old Testament on which the entire collection of the Old Testament hinges, and that is the Exodus. Before the Exodus actually occurs, you get a strong sense that God is setting something up, that events are headed in that direction. Then afterwards everything looks back on the moment of the exodus.

We have God just kind of introducing himself to Abraham, saying, "I'm going to make your descendents a blessing to all the world. I'm going to raise you up; you're going to have a son even though your wife is barren. Now move from where you are all the way over to the land that I'm going to take you to." I'm kind of surprised that he went because that would be sort of weird if God appeared to me and I didn't know God, and all of a

sudden He was like 'Hey, you're my new best friend.' That would have been weird. It's important for us to know that when God makes the promise that Abraham's descendants are going to be a blessing to all nations, what this means, what that really was going to look like isn't clear at that point. It's this promise that hasn't taken shape; he's not real sure what it's going to look like.

The other interesting thing is that God is showing who he is. And the reason why I say it like that is because there were all kinds of gods, so to speak, in the Mesopotamian world. In the near east, gods weren't really all that nice of people. In their worship they engaged in temple prostitution among other things, and there was also - the fancy word is sacril violence - what that really means is human sacrifice; this took place. So it's interesting as God is kind of introducing himself to Abraham, one of the things He says is, "Go and sacrifice the son that I gave you to be." That would not have seemed so outlandish because other gods so to speak, in that area asked for that, or people thought they did. So the scene then, when Abraham takes Isaac, ties him up and takes the knife - and then God stops him. First off, Abraham has proven that he is faithful to God, secondly God is saying I'm not like that, this is not who I am; which would have been a revolutionary concept; all of a sudden everything changes. So we move on.

Abraham has Isaac, Isaac has Jacob, and before we know it we have the tribes of Israel: large groups of people enslaved in Egypt. The fact that God does anything about their situation says something about God. The idea that God would care about His people is a foreign concept, still. Now all of a sudden we have this God who doesn't demand any kind of human sacrifice, now all of a sudden this God is compassionate towards people who are suffering; this is a new idea. So when God steps down and rescues His people from Egypt and shows that He's compassionate, and shows that He cares about His people like He promised, all of a sudden God is a rescuing God; He is a redeeming God - that's who He is, that's how He identifies Himself. That is a powerful change. Then of course after that you have say, the book of Deuteronomy. The whole point of the book of Deuteronomy is that the people need to remember that God rescued them out of Egypt. Then you have the books of Joshua and Judges, the people would forget, bad things would happen, they would remember 'oh yeah, the God that we served, at least our forefathers did, He rescued them, He redeemed them from slavery in Egypt,' they remember that things would go better. Then things would go worse, then things would get better because they would remember.

That kind of rhythm establishes the history of the Old Testament from that point on, until you get to the prophets. And the prophets, one of the big messages there, 'you've forgotten that God cares about His people, and instead you went off to other gods. That God wants you to serve the oppressed, to help them; the poor the orphan and the widow.'

So then we get to the New Testament, and trust me this is getting back to salt and light; I see some doubt in people's faces. When we get to the New Testament I hesitate to say that Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection is the hinge of the New Testament, because it's

much broader than that. Yes, Exodus is the focal point of the Old Testament, the crucifixion of Jesus and His resurrection is sort of the hinge point on all of human history, much less the New Testament. Because the redemption and the rescue that God brought His people or gave to His people out of Exodus, He then gives to everyone; it's not just an ethnic group, the Israelites. All of a sudden God's love, God's rescue, God's redemption is available to everyone - in 3 days this is accomplished, because God rescues and that is what Jesus did. He steps in, He dies, He defeats death, and now this rescue and redemption is made available to everyone.

Now salt and light, quick primer. Salt in the ancient world was critical, it was used a preservative, it could also stop rotting meat from rotting any further. It could be used as an antiseptic, tastes good on popcorn. Light illuminates, it gives light, it shows you the way, it shows you how things are. And Jesus says, "If the salt has lost its saltiness what good is it?" I ask what is it, because if you have something that looks like salt and lick it doesn't taste like salt, then it's not salt. And if you have light that doesn't give light then it's not light. The reason why I say it like that is that Jesus isn't just giving us more to do. (You know, be salt and be light.) He's saying you are salt; you the church, my people, the people rescued by God are salt and are light. This being salt and light looks an awful lot like furthering the kingdom of God.

I'm taking a little bit of liberty, so to speak, in that the rest of this message won't be quite like a traditional Lutheran message. There's been something on my heart that I really want to share about salt and light, that God's kingdom is coming, and we look at biblical history and the events that happened. And it's not just biblical history, it's our history too. If we are now God's people, then the Exodus is part of our history.

But one of the things that we don't necessarily focus on, and there's some reasons for it, is the history of the church. Parts of it are dark, like the crusades and apartheid. A lot of people have been wrongly killed in the name of Jesus, when Jesus said, "Love your enemies." But, there are also some bright spots, and I noticed as I was thinking through some of these bright spots, they looked an awful lot like salt and light in the earth. These were times when Christians were just being Christians because that's what they do.

The first example that I want to go to actually occurred in the third century; 200's AD. There were all kinds of rumors; Christians got accused of everything because they're weird and not like all the other Romans worshipping Mars and Jupiter and on. One of the rumors was that Christians were immune to the plague, which was common in a large ancient sprawling city like Rome. So at the first signs of the plague, anyone who had any kind of means or money would immediately split because they didn't want to get the plague. But what happened was that Christians, still a very illegal religion, (you could get killed for saying Jesus is Lord), would flock into the cities to nurse the sick. Over time, if you're around it and if you don't die from the plague, you'll develop some resistance to it. Which was why the rumor actually was kind of true. But I think that's a beautiful example of our history. That some of our forefathers in the faith would go into a city

where thousands or maybe even millions were dying from a horrible disease, because they loved them, nursed them and wanted to care for them the best they could.

To me that's a powerful story because what we do here on Sunday mornings; we come and sit in the pews, we worship God, we take a sacrament, we pray, we listen to His word. What we're doing here is intimately connected to what happened then. Not all of that is good, I realize, but there are beautiful moments that we can take hold of and say, this is ours too.

Fast forward, quite a bit of time actually, about 1500 years, we're in the 1700's. There's a group called the Moravians, when European imperialism was in full swing and slavery was big. People would capture slaves from Africa, a lot of indigenous populations there, and you know the rest. Slave owners would not want their slaves to be influenced by other people by talking to them, because then they get ideas, 'maybe we shouldn't be slaves,' then you've got a rebellion on your hands. It was hard to talk to, communicate, get anything to people who were slaves. So you have the Moravians, who were some of the best missionaries the world has ever seen, sold themselves into slavery because by doing so they would be able to minister to slaves for about four years. After that your body might end up breaking down and then you'd die. But a group that cared so much about the people that no one cared about, that they would become like them and minister to them is a beautiful image; and it kind of sounds like God. Our God is a god who acts, our God is a god who redeems and rescues. And the mission of the church, the kingdom of God, being salt and light is furthering that redemption and that rescue, and bringing it to our neighbors even though they drive us nuts, to our co-workers, friends, family and so on.

One of the interesting things, and really the reason why I'm here at Redeemer is that my generation is one that has by and large left the church. I think we're looking at statistics around 4% of my generation, broad spectrum across the United States, will be affiliated with the church. In the past it's been really hard to talk to people about God and about Jesus and about Christian faith, because people hated the church, and they still kind of do. There are some reasons, not all of them are justified, and it kind of blows my mind how little we talk about, for example, the Christians that went into the cities as plague was breaking out or the Moravians who sold themselves into slavery so they could minister to people. These things kind of get swept under because we all know a negative story sells.

All that to say, there's been an interesting shift in culture lately, the last 10 or 15 years; all of sudden Jesus is respected. In Santa Cruz, a guy did interviews where he would ask people about Jesus. And their countenance would light up and they would smile, they would describe Him as an amazing spiritual leader, a great humanitarian, an amazing teacher, someone with incredible enlightened spiritual insight. Then he would ask, what do you think about Christians? And they would kind of close up and they would come up with some pretty dark things, pretty dark descriptions. But my point is that we can work with that. That maybe all of a sudden a renewed interest in Jesus and who He was -

because it's hard to say, "I don't think the whole love your enemy kind of thing is a good idea or I don't think being forgiving is all that great," – is something we can use. And all of a sudden people are picking up again on Jesus' message, this is really powerful,' even though they have no interest in the Christian faith whatsoever.

I think maybe this cultural step is at least going to make it easier for us to get back into society and talk about a God who rescues, who cares, who is concerned about people who are oppressed, people who are down-trodden; the poor, the people who are sick, perhaps dying, lonely and so on and so forth. Because it's kind of what Jesus did anyway. You look at His life and He hung out with the tax collectors, the sinners, not the elite. Again it's hard to say, "well the really needy don't really need help." Of course not, because our God rescues, and this is good news, and it is a powerful, beautiful message for the world. I don't' think many people understand that our God rescues. He is all about redemption and redeeming situations and people. And a lot of this looks like being salt and light; this is the kingdom of God. Things like forgiveness and love, compassion; these are good words. This is who we are as a church; this is who we are as a people. Whether we know it or not it's like salt and light. You can't just say well I'm salt but I don't want to be salty - we're not saying that. This is good news, this is who we are. Who we are is a group of people that are defined by a God who rescues and redeems.

So now at the end of the sermon, instead of Create In Me A Clean Heart which we would normally sing, what we're going to do is actually sing a song written by an Englishman by the name of John Newton. This writer originally was a slaver. He bought and sold slaves; he became a captain of a slave ship. It's estimated that he's responsible for a million or so slaves, captured, enslaved and sold like potatoes. There was a point in his life where he almost died when he was at sea, and this shook him as coming close to dying usually does, and it haunted him - it was God haunting him and he became a Christian. And over time he actually became a Anglican priest. In a little bit more time he started to realize that slavery is evil. God redeemed him. At the end of his life he spent a lot of time working against slavery as an abolitionist, and he went blind and wrote a song, it took a long time to work out all the verses, and that's what we're going to sing now. It's hymn number 509 in the blue book - I'm sure you all know it, it's Amazing Grace.