

Hopefully, and I realize in our current world this isn't necessarily a given, so again I say, hopefully, we all have a fairly passing knowledge of the history of the Underground Railroad which operated throughout the years of slavery and the Civil War in America. Set up as a series of safe houses and places of refuge tracing all the way from the Deep South to Canada, it was a means of slaves to escape from their owners and find their way to freedom, usually through the guidance of their conductor and the aid of others along the way who helped post codes or other indicators of how to reach the next stop of safety along their path to the promised land.

The ways in which slaves and their guides maneuvered their way from stop to stop was vast and various, relying on songs, turns of phrase, code words, or hidden symbols to help them discern which way to go, on top of following the topography of the land and the light of the constellations. It was complex and almost mysterious and at the end of the day, downright miraculous that such a system was able to be coordinated without the aid of text messages, internet connection, and Google maps.

I was struck all over again last week by the immense wonder of this system as I watched a documentary on Harriet Tubman and her vital role not only in the Underground Railroad but the Civil War as well. As the documentary closed, with strains of "Go Down Moses" playing in the

background, the film cut to scene after scene of houses that have been identified as having been on the Underground Railroad, and through each picture there was one thing that held constant. No matter the size, shape, or makeup of the house, all of them had one thing in common: a lantern lit and in a place of prominence in the front window. My history lessons from elementary and middle school came careening back into my mind as I remembered the significance of such lanterns—now simply symbols that Christmas is around the corner as we all put our candles in all of our windows. They didn't start out as such. No, those lone lanterns, lit and placed in specific windows during specific times served as a sign. A sign which said, here in this place you will be safe. Here in this place you will find rest. Here in this place, you will find a home for the night, where you will be accepted, protected, and loved. And just like that, mixed in with those lower school memories, came the words of our gospel. You are the light of the world...so let your light shine before others...

One of the hallmarks of Matthew's gospel is that he is absolutely adamant in pointing out every single instance in which Jesus' life, words, or actions fulfilled something that had been stated previously in scripture by the prophets. I always tell folks in Bible study if you're ever on Jeopardy and the category is identify that book of the Bible, if the clue says such and such

happened, in order to fulfill what was written in scripture that is your cue to say, MATTHEW!! It's his bread and butter, which is why I'm actually a little surprised that he doesn't take advantage of the opportunity which is presented to him in the gospel this morning to do his favorite thing, because there is a deep, deep link between Jesus' words to the disciples here and what Isaiah prophesied to the people of Israel long before Jesus walked the earth. But maybe Matthew is just trying to keep people on their toes.

We are still deep in the Sermon on the Mount this week, Jesus going over the syllabus for apostleship with the disciples point by point. He has told them that they are to out and bless those whom the world tends to ignore, those who would by no means feel blessed on their own, and then he gives them some new instructions, which we get this week. He tells them that they *are*, not might be, may be, could be, *are* the light of the world. A city on a hill. They are to let their light so shine before others, not to bring glory and honor to themselves, but to shine a light upon God and God's amazing acts in the world, the amazing grace of God present for all people. This isn't a suggestion, this is who they are now. They don't get the luxury of hiding or shrinking away when the world gets too hard. The world can be dark and scary and feel awful for so many of these people they are called to

bless and they are to be the light that shines in their darkness, bringing hope and light to their siblings.

Now...the natural question if I were the disciples would be ok, well, sure, but *how* exactly are we to do this? Jesus gives them the answer at a slant, telling them that the law and the prophets will be fulfilled in his ministry and that their righteousness should exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, which if we think about how Jesus feels about those folks makes us realize it's a pretty low bar for righteousness that he sets. Yet...the question still lingers, ok, the answer is in the law and prophets and not doing what the scribes and Pharisees do...and that is where Isaiah comes in, where Matthew missed his opportunity to do his favorite thing, because Isaiah has the answer for how one lets their light shine.

Isaiah is facing a people who are ticked off with God, flat out. In their minds they are doing *everything they should*, and God is ignoring them. They lament to God that God doesn't recognize their fasts, doesn't see how *hard* they are working. And God pretty much rolls God's eyes and says, uh huh, yeah, y'all don't get it. Their fasts are a front, an excuse to point to and say, I am so faithful, when really they aren't interested in doing what God actually says in the law and prophets. How do you fulfill the law? How do you let your light shine? You loose the bonds of injustice, let the oppressed

go free, share your bread with the hungry, give the homeless a shelter, clothe the naked. You live and love righteously with and *for* your neighbor. You don't go through the motions of a false faith. You care about the world your siblings live in and strive to make it better. You don't lament that God doesn't care when you do the bare minimum. You let your light shine by loving God's people. All of God's people. The people that Jesus proclaimed in the Beatitudes would be blessed.

Not only is this how you are a light to the world, Isaiah gives those who do this another title, repairer of the breach, restorer of streets to live in. Imagine that, a world where we are all shining for the sake of others, lighting up the darkness of our siblings, repairing those things which have been rent asunder, a restoring our streets to places of safety and hope. I dare say, we all hear that and want to scoff a little or at least shrug our shoulders and say, yeah it sounds nice, but that's impossible, so why bother. We'll stick to our fake fasts, our checking the box of Sunday attendance, and words apathetically said in prayer, because the world is so messed up what more could God ask of us?

The disciples probably thought the same thing. In a world rife with military oppression, empire, and divisions between Jew, Gentile, and Samaritan, with different ethnicities thronging Galilee, a massive gap

between rich and power, and a power structure that didn't really seem to care about much beyond lining their own pockets, a world where too many were sick and too many were dying, what in the world were they going to be able to do? And Jesus told them: light up the world, chase away the darkness, bring the kingdom. If you hide the gospel message you know is true and full of hope, you are as worthless as a light hidden under a bushel basket, creating darkness for others and yourself. Jesus didn't deny it was hard, there's a reason they needed *a lot* of teaching up on that mountain, but he also thought it was possible. The kingdom of God would be a reality through the hands, feet, and light of his disciples.

So what are we to do? It's true, our world is hard and filled with problems that feel impossible. If it isn't a mass shooting, it's an innocent life lost at the hands of those corrupted by their own sense of power. If it isn't shouts of racism, it's shouts of transphobia. If it isn't the price of eggs, it's the reality that how can anyone living paycheck to paycheck afford groceries? If it isn't a pandemic, it's another loved one diagnosed with cancer. If it isn't the war in Ukraine, it's our own politicians focusing more on re-election and their own self-preservation than the good of the nation. Our world is full of a whole lot of dark, so what good would our one little light do?

Well...let's see shall we? Can one of my ushers turn all the lights off? All of them. All of them off. While they're doing that and I'm getting these lights, get out your cell phones. *Once this happens, slowly ask individuals to turn their light on, and see if it helps the people around them, until eventually build to all of our lights being on.* So...sure, one little light didn't light up the whole world, but it lit of the world of the person right next to you, and when one little light combined with the rest of our little lights, the darkness couldn't hold a candle to what we have here.

The world can be a dark place, but it's up to us how we choose to live in it. Do we want to live hidden under a bushel basket, hoarding our light so that only we can see in our little circle around us, or do we want to live in bold proclamation, a proverbial lantern lit in our windows that we are a place where the gospel lives, breathes, and loves? Do we want to be a place, a person who declares we only have space for our one little light, or a person who shines our light forth so that around us people feel safe, loved, welcomed, protected? The spark of the gospel started with 12 little lights, and those 12 little lights sparked a revolution of love and hope for the entire world. What will you do with your spark? Will you dose it to keep yourself safe or will you shine it out of all of your windows so that the world may know here, here the gospel lives for all? **AMEN!!!**