

Epiphany 5, Yr A, 020914
All Saints Episcopal Church

"You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world."

So, let's talk about salt. We all know that salt is used to enhance the flavor of food and as a food preservative. It is vital to the life and health of our bodies - without enough salt in our bodies, we would die. But there is a lot more to know about salt.

Salt is essential to life, part of every cell in our bodies and part of the cells of all living things; it is a precious commodity left in the earth by seas long dead and gone. We humans, who evolved from creatures in the sea, remember that connection in our need for salt.

Salt has long held an important place in religion and culture. Now inexpensive, salt was prized and pricey until modern times; the mining of it made empires rich while working slaves to death in Jesus' day. At great banquets, distinction was made between those who sat above and "below the salt line," that is, dishes of salt were placed on the high tables where the nobles ate, but not on the lower tables where the less important people sat.

Greek worshippers consecrated salt in their rituals. Jewish Temple offerings included salt; on the Sabbath, Jews still dip their bread in salt as a remembrance of those sacrifices. In the Old Testament, Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of salt.

Greek slave traders often bartered salt for slaves, giving rise to the expression that someone was "not worth his salt." Early Roman legionnaires were given special salt rations known as "*salarium argentum*" -- the Latin origin of the word "salary."

Covenants in both the Old and New Testaments were often sealed with salt: the origin of the word "salvation." The prophet Elisha sprinkled salt into the spring at Jericho to purify the water (*2 Kings 2:21*). To eat salt with another person was a sign of loyalty, sort of a passing of the peace pipe, a breaking of bread, a sign of commonality (*Numbers 18:19*). Priests scattered salt on sacrifices, and seasoned incense with salt. Parents rubbed salt all over their newborn baby's body as protection against all kinds of ills (*Ezekiel 16:4*).

In the Roman Catholic Church, salt is or has been used in a variety of purifying rituals. In fact, until Vatican II, a small taste of salt was placed on a baby's lip at his or her baptism. Orthodox churches include salt in the baptismal liturgy, pouring some on the wet infant with the words, "*May you be preserved for eternal life.*"

In Leonardo DaVinci's famous painting, "The Last Supper," Judas Escariot has just spilled a bowl of salt - a portent of evil and bad luck. To this day, this is the reason behind why someone who spills salt should throw a pinch over his left shoulder to ward off any devils that may be lurking behind.

In Buddhist tradition, salt repels evil spirits. So it is customary to throw salt over your shoulder before entering your house after a funeral: it scares off any evil spirits that may be clinging to your back.

Shinto religion also uses salt to purify an area. Before sumo wrestlers enter the ring for a match—which is actually an elaborate Shinto rite—a handful of salt is thrown into the center to drive off malevolent spirits.

In the Southwest, the Pueblo worship the Salt Mother. Other native tribes had significant restrictions on who was permitted to eat salt. Hopi legend holds that the angry Warrior Twins punished mankind by placing valuable salt deposits far from civilization, requiring hard work and bravery to harvest the precious mineral.

In 1933, the Dalai Lama was buried sitting up in a bed of salt.

Salt in our water softens it; salt on frozen streets and sidewalks melts the ice; gargling salt water can soothe a sore throat.

Matthew's Jesus tells us - in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount - that we are the salt of the earth, the light of the world. Note the present tense - we *are* salt and we *are* light - not we *will be* some time in the distant future. Not only is Jesus all about what the Kingdom of God is like, but about who we are in this new realm.

We are the salt that adds flavor to lives around us. We are light that makes plain the justice way of the kingdom of God. Jesus says that by being tasty and lit up, we make a difference for God in the world. Neither salt nor light exists for itself; they only fulfill their purpose when they are used, when they are poured out on others.

When Jesus says that he has come to fulfill the law, he is not talking about the minutia of ritual observance. He is talking about the fulfillment of the Law, the Torah, through the fulfilling of its purpose. He is talking about what we call in Godly Play the "Ten Best Ways" - the best ways that we fulfill the 2 greatest commandments to 1) love God and to 2) love people.

This is why we are here. This is our purpose: to love God and to extend God's love to others.

God makes us the salt of the earth. Salt, however, does not exist for its own sake. No one sits down to eat salt and salt alone. For salt to work, it must be applied to something, to penetrate and preserve and flavor the food that people eat.

In the same way, light is not meant just to be looked at, it is not meant to be covered up or treasured like some precious object. Light illumines things, and brings hidden things into view. It heals minds and bodies. It is given so that people can see what is around them and walk in safety. It is meant to penetrate the darkness and overcome it.

"You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." These words are meant for you and for me.

As salt and light, we can serve as a basic nutrient for others. We can be nurturing agents for those around us - caring, helping, enriching.

We can show others through our actions what the love of God is like by supporting the least, the lost and the lonely.

We can help melt the iciness of life - applying the warmth of love to frozen relationships.

As salt and light, we make a difference in the world: giving hope where there is no hope; embracing where there is loneliness and despair; tolerating where there is prejudice; reconciling where there is conflict; bringing justice where there is wrong; providing food where there is hunger; giving comfort where there is distress or disease. Jesus empowers us to purify, to heal, to nurture, to thaw the frozen, the preserve and to season the people of the earth.

Know you are salt. Know you are light. It is who we are. It is why we are here.