
On October 27, 2008, something happened that had never occurred before. It was Game 5 of the World Series between the Philadelphia Phillies and the Tampa Bay Rays. After the top of the 6th inning, the score was tied 2-2. It had been raining, but officials hoped to get the whole game in before the bottom dropped out. But now, it was clear they wouldn’t make it. Philly, Chase Utley reported later, “the infield was basically under water,” and the umpiring crew chief said the wind and the rain threatened to make the game “comical.” So, it was suspended – that is, it would be resumed later from the point where they left off. It was the first suspended game in World Series history. Now, I won’t go into all the technicalities that determine whether a game stopped for weather counts as a complete game, restarts at the beginning, or is suspended. Suffice to say – this game would pick up again 2 days later – still in the middle of 6th inning – still tied 2-2. +++ In the meantime, everything that had happened so far counted… it was important… it would not be abolished… but the final word on that game had not yet been spoken. +++ It had to be completed eventually – so the teams, and the fans, waited for the rains to stop. In the meantime, at least we had the 2-2 score to talk about and give us a hint how things would turn out. +++ Finally, the ballpark was reopened – the fans filled the stands again – the players took the field – and the game was fulfilled. A lot of important plays were yet to take place – plays that would determine the outcome. A double, a bunt, and a base hit gave the Phillies a one-point lead in the bottom of the 6th. In the top of the 7th, there was a homerun to tie the score again, then a fake throw to first that pulled a runner off base – and he got thrown out at home to end the inning – saving the game and probably the whole series. Then, in the bottom of the 7th – another double, a pinch runner, and an RBI put the Phillies ahead again to stay. That night they won the game and the Series, to become World Champions. +++ Now, you’re probably thinking, “What in the world does that have to do with the Bible?”

When Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill…,” when Jesus says that, as he does in today’s gospel reading – just exactly what does he mean? It’s a hard concept for us to get our hands around. How does Jesus fulfill the law – and what does it mean for us? +++ As I thought about that this week, I remembered those Suspended Innings of an unfinished baseball game. +++ So far, God’s People had the Law and the Prophets – a phrase that refers to the entire Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament). But, God’s work was not yet complete. The law and the prophets count… it is important Holy Scripture (remember, following the law’s clear directives is enough to count as righteousness in the Old Testament) – but it’s incomplete. The final word had not yet been said. +++ God’s People awaited the Messiah, who would usher in a new age – and age of justice and peace more profound than anything in the Law. In the meantime, at least they had the Law and the Prophets. +++ And then, finally, the Messiah arrived to settle the score. +++ Jesus Christ is THE… definitive… revelation of the will of God. Last week I said Jesus turns the Law of Moses upside down. That wasn’t just a clever turn of phrase. It was real. From the time of Christ’s arrival, the Suspended Innings are being played out, and everything is changing. – It’s the dawning of the kingdom of God – the law is alive again, and it’s being fulfilled in Jesus Christ. +++ In Matthew more than anywhere else – Jesus enunciates a higher level of righteousness:: – he proclaims that mercy, justice, and love are the foundations of all moral action – everything has to be measured in those terms – even the Law. So, truly, Jesus does not come to nullify the law – he fulfills it by giving us a moral compass. Even if we follow the letter of the law, if our actions do not express mercy, justice, and love – we fall short. +++ That’s why, at the end of today’s reading, Jesus warns, “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” The scribes and Pharisees were experts in following the Law – in fact, they were professionals at it. And, they made it their business to make sure everyone else followed the Law as well. The problem is, they didn’t do so with mercy, justice, and love – instead, they did it to maintain order – and to reinforce their own power. Disciples of Jesus Christ will be held to a higher standard than that – without mercy, justice, and love, the Law is just a set of rules. +++

That’s what the Sermon on the Mount is all about, where today’s reading takes place – Jesus is telling his disciples – and telling all the would-be disciples crowded around him on the side of that mountain – as well as US who would be disciples, and are sitting in these pews today… Jesus fulfills the law as he carves out a New Covenant – as he decrees this new set of Commandments from the side of a mountain – a new delineation of what it means to be God’s People. +++ And, a lot of it contradicts the cultural values we were all raised with:: commandments like “turn the other cheek,”… “love your enemies,”… “do not judge others,”… “do to others as you would have them do to you.”… +++ Christ’s law sends us out to serve the world as a community of faith – a world that is more likely to persecute us for it than to thank us. +++ And Jesus begins all of that, right after the Beatitudes, by talking about salt and light. +++ “You are the salt of the earth,” Jesus proclaims to his disciples, and to all who can hear. And it’s a bit of a loaded statement: “You are the salt of the earth.” First of all, let’s look for a moment at the language: in Greek, the verb este already implies that “you” is the subject – it’s the second-person present tense of “to be” – in other words, este means “you are” – the pronoun “you” is unnecessary – yet it’s there anyway: hUmeis, “You.” basically saying, “You you are the salt of the world.” That, plus its position in the sentence, gives “You” a very great emphasis. It could as well have been translated, “You, and no one else besides you, are the salt of...
the earth.” +++ Those who were supposed to be the salt have failed – now it falls on you. And, salt had lots of implications at the time: it was associated with sacrifice, with faithfulness to the covenant, seasoning food, purification, and as a preservative. +++ As the salt of the earth – Jesus calls us to be all of that, and more. +++ Salt sustains and deepens life. +++ It flavors the stew of God’s kingdom so others might taste it for themselves – a kingdom with pizzazz and zing, a kingdom of wellbeing and unity. +++ We are called to add just the right balance of salt. If we dominate the world – as the Pharisees attempted to do – as Christians are known for doing in our own time, passing public judgement on “categories” of people and sins – when we try to dominate the culture like that, we ruin the flavor and drive people away. On the other hand, if we are too passive and too quiet – if our voices aren’t among those crying out for justice to the oppressed and relief to the poor, we’ve let our salt lose its flavor and we add nothing to the world. To be the salt of the earth, you have to keep working at it, keep measuring and tasting, keep adjusting the recipe, keep developing and following your moral compass, keep doing everything for peace, justice, and love.

Then Jesus proclaims, “You are the light of the world. A City built on a hill cannot be hid.” It’s interesting how those two metaphors are actually in contrast. As light, Jesus calls the disciples to illuminate the world. The primary job of light is to not to be seen – it’s to illuminate the truth of other things, so they can be seen as they are. +++ On the other hand, the metaphor of the city on a hill tells the disciples they must also be seen. They must throw light on the truth and – at the same time – be visible agents of Jesus Christ, bringing his gospel to the world. +++ Salt – light – a shining city on a hill – they all depict mission as essential to discipleship, just as saltiness is essential to salt – and shining is to light. It’s just what you do. +++ Part of our celebration of God must be to go into the world – be a part of it – and to serve it: to let our light shine. +++ But we must also remember that we don’t create the light any more than salt creates its own saltiness. +++ The church receives the light of God through Christ – and we are called to share it.

From the beginning, Jesus knew it was time for a change. The empty, self-serving piousness of the Pharisees and scribes had poisoned the religious life of Israel. The prophets had called for change generations ago, change which would only come in fits and starts, eventually falling back into old habits. That’s what Isaiah railed against in today’s Old Testament reading: “Day after day they seek me… as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God.” The people complain… “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers,” Isaiah responds. “Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high… Is not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice,… to undo the thongs of the yoke,… to let the oppressed go free,… and to break every yoke?… Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,… and bring the homeless poor into your house,… when you see the naked, to cover them,… and not to hide yourself from your own kin? THEN your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.” +++ For generations, the Lord called prophets to remind God’s People to turn back to the law – but ultimately, it was to no avail. +++ Finally, Jeremiah proclaimed that one day things would be different. “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel… 32 It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors… a covenant that they broke… 33 But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall ALL know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.” +++ God was preparing to do something new. +++ In the closing chapters of the Old Testament, Malachi tells Israel to prepare: “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. 2 But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?” +++ The Savior was on his way… The New Covenant would be established… The Messiah would arrive and make all things new again.

Then the rains had come,… the game was suspended for about 400 years as God’s own timetables worked themselves out. Babylon faded away, Assyria reached its peak then fell, the Greeks conquered Palestine and were eventually replaced by the mighty Roman Empire. +++ Then one day,… on the banks of the River Jordan, John’s voice arose, “crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” +++ Finally, the Suspended Innings would be played. – As Jesus Christ himself stepped to the plate, on the mountainside that day, throngs of people gathered – people hungry for relief from tyranny,… thirsty to be cherished and led by a Good Shepherd,… and ready to commit themselves to changing the world. +++ And then he said to them … “You … ARE …the salt of the earth.” +++ The Good News is, you are invited into the New Covenant of Jesus Christ – the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. As a disciple, you are called to be its salt and light… you are encouraged to be guided by a moral compass that is trained upon the Lord… and you are trusted to share the mercy, justice, and love of God to a world that deeply needs it. +++The Law has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. +++ Through him, the final score is a victory for us all! +++ Alleluia!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.