

“Salt and Light” – Matthew 5:13–20 - Rev. Adam Hange

Jesus tells his followers: “You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.” I needed to hear that this week. Not: try a little harder. Not: keep working at it, and someday you will be. Just: You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

This affirmation comes right after he names the blessed — not the rich and powerful, but the poor in spirit, the meek, the mourners, those who hunger for justice. He says to the crowd gathered to hear his sermon on the Mount: You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

These two familiar metaphors... it’s hard to over-emphasize how essential salt was in the ancient world. You have to imagine a world where there was no refrigeration. Salt preserved food, healed wounds, cleansed and purified. It mattered so much that Roman soldiers’ pay included a *salarium* of salt — giving us the word salary. Found by the sea, or in mineral deposits in the ground, salt was not glamorous; it was useful. Salt helped make life livable. More than that, enjoyable. Salt — that life may always have flavor!

A lamp, too, was something ordinary but precious. Someone had to make the lamp out of clay. Oil had to be pressed from olives. It was a laborious process, part of the everyday costs of life. But again, light helped make life livable, safe, comforting, warm.

So of course, no one would light a lamp, then hide it under a bushel. No! The thing about light is it doesn’t argue with darkness — it simply makes visible what’s already there. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

Again, Jesus is not talking about what we should become, but what we already are — and how our presence, our witness, actually matters in a world that can sometimes be indifferent or even cruel.

On January 15th, in Gresham, a seven-year-old named Diana had a persistent nosebleed that wouldn’t quit. Her mom and dad rushed her to Adventist Health in

SE Portland. In the parking lot, just as they were about to enter the hospital, they were detained by federal immigration agents. They were barely steps from the doctor when agents surrounded their car and took them into custody. The family, who has an active asylum case and is in the country legally, spent nearly three weeks in a detention facility in Dilley, Texas — the same facility that held five-year-old Liam Ramos, the boy in the blue bunny hat. After public outcry and advocacy from elected officials, Liam is home again with his father. And yesterday, little Diana and her two parents were flown home to Gresham.

These stories remind us that life can be fragile, and sometimes harm visits places we assume are safe — hospitals, schools, homes. No longer. Across the country, U.S. citizens are being told to carry their passports lest they be mistakenly detained. Across the country, new detention facilities are being bought, built, and expanded, often with lights on twenty-four hours a day, while oversight is limited, medical care is sometimes denied, and children are held far from home. Ironically, the lights shine constantly, yet so much remains hidden. These are the places where Jesus' call to be light is urgent — to reveal what is happening, to insist that human dignity not be ignored, to stand faithful where life is most fragile. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

A few verses after teaching about salt and light, Jesus says something interesting: "I have not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it." Indeed, he tells them, if they are to be holy, they must go beyond the scribes and the Pharisees. Everyone knew they were the strictest adherents to the law. How can you be more fundamentalist than the fundamentalists? Jesus isn't dismissing the law. Rather, he is calling it back to its deepest intention: justice, mercy, compassion, and the protection of every human life — all life.

This week, in Washington D.C., Congress is debating funding for the Department of Homeland Security, which includes ICE. Many are demanding reforms — requiring signed judicial warrants to enter a home, banning face masks during raids, mandating body cameras for accountability — or threatening to withhold funding. Others argue ICE cannot be reformed and should be abolished. To me, these don't seem like radical ideas for law enforcement.

These debates are moral questions, not just political policies. They ask: Does this system protect life? Does it honor human dignity? Does it reflect both the purpose and spirit of our law? These are the questions the gospel invites us to consider.

But it's Super Bowl Sunday, and we'd prefer not to think about politics until tomorrow. Here's a moment from our wider culture that caught people's attention: The musician Bad Bunny — who is headlining tonight's Super Bowl halftime show — used his platform at the 2026 Grammy Awards to say “ICE out” and affirm the humanity of immigrants, declaring, “We're not savages... we are humans, and we are Americans.” His message urged that the only thing more powerful than hate is love, and the audience gave him a standing ovation. Whether or not you follow his music, there is something Christians can notice here: He recognized the platform he was on, and used it to speak truth to power and defend the vulnerable. That is salt — standing and speaking out where lives are at risk. That is light — making visible what others would prefer remain hidden.

Many churches, pastors, even me, would rather not publicly weigh in on the national immigration debate. It would seem that many American Christians, American churches, have lost their salt. We cannot afford to lose our flavor. We cannot hide our light under a bushel. The gospel calls us to rise, to shine, and to preserve life and dignity in all the ordinary and extraordinary places where we are present.

For Jesus says: You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

I also want to lift up what faithful people are already doing here: showing up for mutual aid, sharing food, care, and presence; standing on street corners with signs, making compassion visible; supporting neighbors and families quietly, steadily, without headlines. This is salt refusing to lose its “saltiness.” This is light refusing to remain hidden.

Jesus goes on to speak about various laws, but he does not give a checklist. He simply reminds his disciples of their identity — and then trusts them to discern what it means to live and act according to his ethic of love and justice: holding the powerful accountable, showing up in solidarity with the marginalized.

Here are the questions I keep asking, as your pastor: What would it mean to be salt and light in our community right now? Where is life fragile here? Where is harm hidden? Where does fear or fatigue try to convince us that showing up won't matter? For some of us, salt and light will look like visible presence — advocacy, accompaniment, public demonstrations of care. For others, it will look quiet and steady — care in homes, difficult but meaningful conversations, and small acts of kindness and mercy. For all of us, I believe it begins with refusing to look away.

This is not about earning God's approval. Jesus already declared us salt and light. It's about noticing where God's light is already breaking in — and choosing not to hide it. May we have the courage to stay salty enough to matter, and bright enough to tell the truth — not in accusation, but in love; not in fear, but in faithful presence; not hiding in safety, but shining where life is fragile. Amen.