

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως  
Epiphany 5-A; 5 February 2023  
St. Thomas', Glassboro – Todd Foster  
(rev. 202302051445)

**Why Black Lives Matter**

*[What difference has this Scripture made to me? What is scary/exciting/threatening?]*

*[Thesis: Prophetic voice is still relevant: e.g., BLM]*

*[Good News: God's invitation for our light to shine]*

*[Intention/desired response: Recognize wrong in the world, stand against it; then God's light will shine through us!]*

*Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.*

*"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.<sup>1</sup>*

*In nomine...*

**I. Salt and Light**

Salt and light are important ingredients. They're important for healing, important for curing, important for giving life. Salt and light help make the world go 'round. But they don't generally do it by blending in. They don't add value by being so subtle you can't tell they're there. Salt and light are valued because they have an effect, they change things, they stand out and make things different.

**II. So it was in the time of the prophet Isaiah**

In the time of the prophet Isaiah there were plenty of religious people. There were plenty of people making sacrifices, fasting, and bowing their heads. There were plenty of people going through all the religious motions. But their religious practice didn't make them different from anyone else. It didn't make them stand out. It didn't make them unique or a force for change in the world. Instead, even in their pious acts, God's people were quarrelsome and violent. Their fasting wasn't for spiritual purposes, but it was instrumental, a technique they used to try to make some demand of God and to get their way. It was a self-interested fast.

God, on the other hand, through the prophet, is inviting them to a different kind of fast. When you fast, says God, don't fast because you want something. The simple act of not eating and perhaps not drinking isn't by itself virtuous. Instead, says God:

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<sup>1</sup> Mt 5.13ff NRSV:

*Is not this 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;<sup>2</sup>*

God is inviting God's people to be a little less concerned about shows of piety and more interested instead in the practices of justice. Spend less time on your spiritual bona fides and more time on caring for others. Worry less about religious titles and more about others' well-being.

Some in Israel were rich and some were poor. Some were powerful and some were oppressed. It could be hard, often times, for rich people to see or notice God. For those who wanted to see God, to be in God's presence, the smart thing to do was to ally themselves with those who have been put upon, done wrong, and overlooked: it was for these that God's Kingdom had come. Among the poor, the oppressed, the ones treated badly: this was where God was at work.

### **III. Do you hear what the prophet is saying?**

Do you hear his concern for his neighbors who have been put upon? Do you hear God's care for those who may have few friends in places of human power? Can you imagine ways that this same prophecy, this same reality of God, might have impact today in our modern world?

Two and a half years ago George Floyd was murdered. His murder inspired many protests, many marches. You may remember a march that began here in Glassboro, right across the street from St. Thomas'. Some of us walked in that march. Many of us offered snacks and drinks and encouragement to the marchers. There were chants all along the way as we marched to Deptford. One of the chants was that Black Lives Matter. Black Lives Matter!

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<sup>2</sup> Isa 58.6-8a NRSV.

You may also remember there was a fashion at the time that some people would respond the chant that Black Lives Matter by asserting that All Lives Matter. These counter-chants were usually offered by non-black people. I wondered if they felt left out. There's a knee-jerk reaction that happens sometimes when we're used to being the center of attention and then suddenly all eyes are on someone else. It can be jarring at first.

In fact, there was never any question but that All Lives Matter. That's one of the gifts of the story of the United States. That's one of the beautiful things about democracy: one person, one vote, and all votes are equal. At least, that's the story we like to tell.

Because that hasn't always been true, has it? In fact, the story of America, the story of any community of human beings, has generally been something other than that. We live in a country where Native American Lives have not mattered. Where LGBTQ lives and marriages have not mattered. We live on a continent on which chattel slavery was introduced back in 1619 when kidnapped Africans were first brought to these shores and condemned to lives of unending servitude. The U.S. Constitution counted African Americans as only 3/5 of a person. President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation only freed enslaved persons within states that were at war with the Union. The formal emancipation of all enslaved persons didn't happen until the passage of the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment to the constitution in 1865. A matrix of discriminatory laws and norms broadly referred to as Jim Crow quickly filled the space left by slavery. Jim Crow was only slowly and partially dismantled by Brown v. Board of Education in 1954, the Civil Rights Act in 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, among other decisions, laws, and cultural norms. These things happened within in the life-times of many of us here in this room.

It is a profound irony that race, in itself, is meaningless. People get coded according to the color of their skin, but those standards have changed through time and different people have "passed" in different directions through the coding. Race is a fiction with no biological basis! But race still impacts our lives. Race still impacts the lives of our families and our neighbors. A Pew Study in 2017 found that the median wealth of White households was ten times that of Black households. Race is a fiction, but a fiction which profoundly affects all our lives.

Even today we see a continuing parade of Black Lives that are cheapened, treated as though they did not matter, even as we saw with Tyre Nichols last month.

Black Lives Matter is a protest that reality is broken. There are things in our world that are wrong. God's intentions for the world are different, are better than this. God is calling a different kind of world into being, a world where, indeed, Black Lives Matter in a way that they sometimes still don't seem to today.

This is the same protest to which Isaiah gives voice.

#### **IV. This was Jesus' protest, too!**

Did you hear him?

*Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.*<sup>3</sup>

God is still about the exact same work. This was the message of Moses the law-giver, of Isaiah the prophet, and of Jesus the Messiah. God is about the work of repairing the mess we have made.

When we join in God's work, says the prophet, "then your light shall break forth like the dawn."

When we join in God's work, says Jesus, your "light [will] shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

#### **IV. This is why we observe Black History Month in February.**

This is one little way we can shine our lights, one little way we can call attention to the work that God is doing. We are called to be ambassadors, an advanced outpost of the Kingdom of God, a manifestation of God's intentions which are still to come in their fullness but are seen even now in us!

We live in an era where the spirit of the world is one which picks fights with conversations about race. These spirits are trying to make partisan issues out of things which are not just politics but are actually hurting us. They are picking up on a cultural current that just cannot bear to consider shame or guilt or admission of wrongdoing, past or present! But just because others play politics with an issue does not relieve us of our moral or spiritual duty.

Just because others run scared does not relieve us of our calling to repentance, to confession, and to reconciliation. It's a part of our liturgy, our weekly practice, to confess that I have sinned by my fault, my own fault, my own grievous fault. And we can do so because we know that it is by bringing the wrongs of the world, and our own wrongs, to the cross of Christ that we find forgiveness and healing and repair. Part of this work is the recounting of Black History as a part of a fuller, truer account of ourselves and our community.

Racism will not be "over" until those who suffer from it say it is.

Until then we are called to be agents of change, to make a difference in the world, not to blend in but to stand out for God's work of justice wherever we have opportunity to do so. That can take many shapes and forms in our individual lives, from marches to a quiet word of encouragement. And for us at St. Thomas', our joyful celebration of Black History Month is part of what helps us to be salt and light.

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3 Mt 5 NRSV.