

Epiphany 5A-26 Sermon  
February 8, 2026  
Trinity Episcopal Church  
The Rev. Sarah D. Thomas

Today we culminate a week that is all about light. All in one week, we had the feast day that honors the presentation of Jesus in the temple when baby Jesus was recognized by Simeon and Anna as the Messiah, the light-filled one. We also had Candlemas, and the ancient Gaelic celebration of Imbolc, both representing the halfway point between the Winter Solstice and the Spring Equinox. All of these festivals from various traditions coincide to make quite a sacred week, culminating with today.

In Diana Butler Bass' new book *A Beautiful Year*, she helps us see that the Christian cycle of light begins all the way back in Advent when we light candles in the deepest darkness, waiting for the light to come. Then on Christmas, the light is born into the world. As John's Gospel puts it, "the true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world." Then on Epiphany, the star shines light over the manger as a sign to seekers. As the season of Epiphany continues, Butler Bass writes, "the light expands, inviting the first disciples to 'come and see.'" The final movement in the arc of light is Candlemas. We don't celebrate Candlemas much in America, but it is still popular in Europe. It is a festival of light, honoring the moment when Jesus was recognized as the light, but also, a time when candles are blessed in church, and the light is carried out into the streets. Butler Bass tells us that ancient tribal people in Europe believed that this is also the week when the earth wakes up. It is the first week when we really notice the days are indeed lengthening. It is associated with the lambing season, with fertility, and with the return of the light.

That certainly makes sense for us this week, in which we have been blessed with gorgeous warm weather. The Santa Barbara nights have suddenly become fragrant with that heady elixir of night-blooming jasmine and pittosporum blossoms. We can hear frogs in the creeks. I started to notice around 5pm that wait a second .... it is still quite light out! This week did indeed feel like the earth is waking up. For those on the East Coast, still buried beneath snow, it is even more profound, because these festivals offer a promise that the soil is loosening, that the days are lengthening, and that Spring will come despite evidence to the contrary.

As Butler Bass puts it, today is the day in the season of Epiphany, when we move from recognizing Jesus as the light of the world to today's shocking revelation in Matthew's gospel when Jesus says, "*You* are the light of the world." We waited for the light in the darkness, the light was born at Christmas, we were invited to follow the light in Epiphany, and today we realize ... *we* are the light. This is the week that the earth wakes up, and it is also the week that we wake up - to our identity and to our vocation. You are the light of the world, Jesus says. You are the salt of the earth. This isn't an invitation. It is a statement. Jesus is letting us know what is already true about who we are.

You are the salt of the earth. What does he mean? In our culture, we have an expression of someone being a "salt-of-the-earth" kind of person, which usually means being decent and hard-working. While those are good qualities, I don't think this is what Jesus means. Salt has many

uses and impacts: It brings out flavor. Sometimes the difference between a bland soup and one bursting with flavor is as simple as adding a little salt. Elizabeth loves to bake and she often tells me that the secret is adding a little salt. Her chocolate chip cookies sprinkled with a little sea salt are to die for. The salt brings out the flavor. How might this apply to us? How is Jesus asking us to add flavor to the world? To our relationships? To our communities? How can the church add zest and dimension and flavor to its city? Good food for thought.

Salt also acts as a preservative. In Jesus' day, there was no refrigeration, so salt was used to preserve meats and fish to keep them from spoiling. How might we, individually and as the church, be agents of preservation? Keeping good things going? Keeping things that nourish us from spoiling? Salt was valued as a natural antiseptic, used as a healing agent. How might we be healing agents? Salt was a symbol of covenant in the ancient world, in which people would ingest salt after making a pact, a covenant. If we are the salt of the earth, how are we in covenant with the earth? And lastly, salt melts ice. Just saying. Being the salt of the earth is quite a vocation!

You are also the light of the world. *You* are the light of the world, Jesus tells us. Light illumines. It gives warmth. It helps us see. It dispels darkness. All of these things, all of these qualities, are what we already are. Jesus doesn't say, "Try to become light." He says, "You *are* the light."

Author Alexander Shaia takes this even further. He views Jesus' call for us to be salt and light, not as a checklist of behaviors, but as an invitation to awaken to our own divine participation and inner radiance. For Shaia, light isn't something we earn through effort. Rather, it's something we uncover as we awaken to who we are in Christ. He says that finding our radiance begins with remembering who we already are, like a lamp that finally glows once it is plugged in. "Don't try to shine," Shaia says, just plug in.

The theologian John Shea tells a story about a group of church members who wanted to put up a basketball court in the parking lot of their church. They wanted teenagers to have a place to hang out and have fun. After they installed the basketball stand and net, they had an idea to put three basketballs in a net tied to the stand. That way, a ball would always be available if someone walking by wanted to play. The priest did not like this idea. He thought the balls would be stolen. To solve this problem, the people said they had a solution. They would buy three expensive basketballs. When people saw how nice the balls were, they wouldn't take them. The priest didn't agree with this logic. But they went ahead and bought three expensive basketballs and placed them in the net. The first one disappeared in a week. The second one was gone in a month. But it took five months for the third one to vanish. The priest admitted the balls lasted longer than he thought they would, but he still thought the people were being foolish. They decided to buy three new expensive basketballs anyway. They said to the priest, "Good basketballs for good people."

Shea tells this story to illustrate a way of being salt. More than "doing good," being salt means creative engagement with the world. Shea writes, "The people of salt and light are called upon to envision and execute experiments. When the experiments fail, it is not time to retreat to old ways, but to try new experiments. Good basketballs for good people."

We see salty and light-filled experiments happening all around us, in the ways people are caring for their neighbors and resisting oppression however they can. The "singing resistance" groups that I mentioned a few weeks ago, are growing. People are really getting into it. There is a wildly popular songbook that is circulating online and the trainings are full. Faith leaders and community organizers are planning actions this Wednesday all over the country at various businesses. Creative nonviolent resistance is on the rise. Salty light-filled experiments.

Salt and light do not exist for themselves. Salt gains its special abilities when it comes in contact with other substances. Light becomes light when it shines on something else. We are made for relationship. We are made to add zest and to illumine the way forward – and melt the ice – just by being who we are - as people, and as the church.

On this week of light when the earth wakes up, Jesus asks us to wake up, too, and remember who we are: bearers of salt and light into the cold and dark, bearing the light of Christ that shines out of us. Don't forget that you, in the words of Thomas Merton, are "already walking around shining like the sun." You have more power than you may know. The prophet Isaiah would agree. We heard him tell us today that when we "loose the bonds of injustice," when we work toward "letting the oppressed go free," then our "light will break forth like the dawn and our healing shall spring up quickly."

I see that happening. If you look, you will, too. Trust your salt and your light and be repairers of breaches, and restorers of streets to live in.