

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

February 8, 2026 – FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY, YR. A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: “*Salty, Shining People*”*

Isaiah 58:1-9a (The Lord chooses justice, rather than empty fasting)
Psalm 112:1-9 (Happy are they who delight in God’s commandments)
1 Corinthians 2:1-12 (Paul proclaims only Jesus crucified, not worldly wisdom)
St. Matthew 5:13-20 (Jesus tells His disciples they are salt and the light of the world)

Today’s Gospel lesson continues Jesus’ first major teaching sermon. And immediately after expounding on the Beatitudes—which we heard about, last Sunday—He tells His disciples: “You are the salt of the earth ... You are the light of the world” (Mt. 5:13,14). Have they suddenly taken on the properties of sodium chloride? Does this mean they are to be sprinkled on popcorn, rubbed into country hams, flung upon icy roads, or added to soups and stews? Only if we read the Scriptures too literally! What we will discover is that “salt” was an ancient rabbinic metaphor for *spirituality*. For godliness. For Holy-Spirit-ality.

Jesus takes up this familiar image to describe the Jesus-ness inside His disciples, which they are to carry to the world. Because salt that just sits in the salt-shaker is pretty useless, as is faith without good works—so we read in James, chapter 2, verse 26. So, how is the salt of faith to be used?

As followers of Jesus, we are to live in ways that cause people to ask questions about our lives. We are to exhibit a way of life that makes others scratch their heads—and then begin to seek God for answers. This doesn’t mean a spectacular, walk-on-water, change-the-world lifestyle. Rather, salt is one of the most inconspicuous and ordinary substances. Its grains are minuscule and usually mixed with common things. Salt is down-to-earth, and most of the time, hidden. Yet its presence flavors, preserves, heals, or sharpens—silently and unobserved.

What good is a salt shaker that sits on another table across the restaurant from you? What can it do for your French fries that are right under your nose? Nothing. “Saltiness” has its effect in *immediacy*, where it can be touched, sprinkled, and tasted—the closer its proximity, the more likely the potential for zing!¹

In Biblical times, salt was very important. Without refrigeration, salt was crucial to preserving food. For example, salt would dry out and preserve fish for the winter time. Salt also symbolized the preservation of life itself. If you don’t have salt, what you get is decay. So when Jesus said we are to personally salt the earth, He was asking us to preserve what is good, and true, and right, especially in a culture that does its hardest to oppose such virtues and values.

Salt was also important in Biblical times because of war. Since wars were fought with bows and arrows, spears and swords, there were a lot of injuries during battle. So if you were a wounded soldier, you had to have salt rubbed into your wound. It was very sharp and it hurt *a lot*. But you needed salt to experience healing. That was part of how wounds were treated.²

And so, there are times when we are called to rub salt into others’ wounds in order that they might be healed. *What?* You ask. As hard as it is, there are occasions when we are to confront someone else with the truth—in a loving way, of course—if they are living in such a way that is hurting another person or is offensive to God.

In ancient Israel, preserving, healing salt also went along with sacrifices. Because it purifies, it was seen as that which sanctifies, or makes holy. Where there was salt, there was a covenant. It was even customary to rub salt onto a Hebrew baby’s head. That way, the child was considered ‘seasoned’—or, marked as God’s own. Although it has been discontinued in our time, that tradition carried over into early Christian baptismal rites: A little blessed salt was placed on the baby’s tongue as a pledge that the child might have a taste for heavenly wisdom, and that he or she would be preserved from the corruption of sin.

One of the first-century apostolic Fathers, St. Ignatius of Antioch, described believers as “salted in Christ.” For it is Christ who preserves us from corruption. When we have faith in Him, and live by His teaching, Our Lord preserves us from sin and death, and we become recognizable to the world by our salty taste and smell. No, not like old fish. But like *Jesus!*

Salt also points to Jesus’ sacrifice on the Cross: Beaten, bruised, and broken for our salvation. There, the blood and sweat that flowed from His forehead pierced by the crown of thorns were salty. And at the baptismal font we are salted with His sacrifice, dying to sin because of His death, entering into light because He faced the darkness for us, so that we would never have to be tasteless salt. For salt that loses its taste is only fit to be thrown out. And God does not want that for us.

In addition to calling us to be “salt” for the world, Jesus also calls us to be “light.” Returning once again to Baptism, a lighted candle is presented. You’ve seen us give it to others. You may have received one too. And with that candle are said words such as, “Receive this light and live always in the light of Christ.” Or, as we say here at St. John’s when giving the candle to the infant’s parent or godparent: “Receive the light of Christ as a sign that [this child] has passed from darkness into light, and of the new life enkindled within [him or her]. Do all in your power to help [this child] shine [his or her] light in the world, to the glory of God.”

We light the Baptismal candle from the Christ candle that burns with His light. It seemed to the world as though the light of Christ was snuffed out on the Cross—and indeed it was, so that we might be freed from eternal darkness. But because God raised Jesus from the dead, His light will never dim. And it shines throughout every age in those who know and love Him.

What does a light do? When you see a light ahead of you on a dark night, it raises hope and serves to direct your journey. As Christ’s lights in the world, we are to live lives that are an inspiration to others. Our lives are to be like beacons that show lost and weary travelers the way home. Our lives are to be like lighthouses, guiding others safely through the raging storms of life. We are to be the light that’s left on, hospitable and welcoming to all who cross our path.

Born anew. Forgiven. Baptized. Salted. Ablaze with Christ’s light and life. That’s you, and you, and you, and me. So here we are today, God’s salty, shining people.

But are *you* feeling as though your flavor is gone, or that your light may be dim, or even have flickered out? If so, remember that we aren’t salty all by ourselves. Nor can we be lights on our own. Not even a spark. For Jesus is our salt. He is our light.³ His Spirit within us is the salt that never loses its taste. And Saint John writes in the opening of his gospel (1:5): Jesus is “the light [that] shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.” Thank God for that comforting, good news!

Let us pray: God our Father, on a hillside in Galilee, Your Son Jesus called us to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Give us the strength, wisdom, and grace to become people of the Beatitudes in our day so that our words may season the world with the flavor of the Gospel and our lives be shining examples of Jesus Christ, who is the true Light of the world. We ask this through Christ, our Lord. *Amen.*⁴

* Adapt. N. George Hacker, “Salty People,” 6 February 2011, St. Christopher’s Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.

¹ Adapt. H. King Oehmig, “Salt and Light,” *Synthesis* (24:2), p. 4.

² Adapt. Edward F. Markquart, “Salty Christians,” <https://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_a_salty_christians.htm> 3 February 2026.

³ Adapt. George Borghardt, “Salt and Light,” *Higher Things* (2011) <<http://higherthings.org/myht/articles/homilies/given-closing-divine-service.html>> 5 February 2011.

⁴ Adapt. “Salt + Light Prayer,” © 2026, [saltandlightmedia](https://slmedia.org/slprayer/) <<https://slmedia.org/slprayer/>> 3 February 2026.