

“The End of the Story”  
Isaiah 58:1-9; Matthew 5:13-16  
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I have a friend who likes to watch COP SHOWS on TV.

Crime dramas like “Law and Order”.

He usually watches them at the end of the day. / He gets home late at night - - after a hard day at work - - and turns on the TV. / He’s tired from a hard day at work - - and he finds his favorite cop show - - often it’s a rerun - - and he settles in on the couch.

But he’s not much of a night owl - - actually.

And so he usually falls ASLEEP before the END of the show.

The way HE describes it is this:

I always see the criminal COMMIT the CRIME - -

But I NEVER see him get CAUGHT!

He never seems to make it to the END of the STORY.

I thought of my friend as I read the scripture readings for this morning.

The Old Testament reading from the prophet Isaiah contains the word “THEN” and it comes up twice. / “Then shall your light break forth...” and “Then shall the Lord hear your cry...” / Then - - is a word that POINTS forward in TIME.

“Then” is about - - the END of the story.

And for the prophet Isaiah - - the END of the story is - - NOT YET.

Isaiah says that “WHEN” people SHARE with the POOR and HUNGRY - - and “WHEN” wickedness and oppression are NO MORE - - THEN - - then their LIGHT will shine.

But - - apparently - - it is NOT YET that way.

WHEN - - presents a question about THEN.

WHEN - - is a question about what will happen to get us to the END.

Because THEN - - at the END - - our LIGHT will shine.

But WHEN will that be?

That's Isaiah's question.

Similarly - - in the New Testament - - Matthew points to the END - - that is NOT YET.

Matthew says that - - being SALT and LIGHT to the world will happen at the END of the STORY. / There will come a time - - according to Matthew - - WHEN - - the law and prophets will be FULFILLED. / Remember the prophet Isaiah - - and Isaiah's QUESTION...?

Isaiah asks WHEN - - and Matthew points to THEN.

Matthew believes that the END of heaven and earth will NOT come - - UNTIL - - every IOTA and every DOT of God's intentions - - have happened.

The meek will inherit the earth...

There will be mercy - - and peace - - and righteousness...

Both Matthew AND Isaiah - - point forward in time - - to this glorious END of the story.

But something seems to be standing in the way.

And Matthew gives a CLUE as to what that is.

Matthew describes SALT that is not SALTY - - and a LAMP that is HIDDEN so no one can see its LIGHT. / Useless salt - - and useless light. / Which might be similar to Isaiah's description of USELESS worship practices in ancient Israel.

Isaiah said that if a person fasts and worships - - but there is still injustice and hunger and oppression and wickedness - - then it's useless worship. / Worship is CONNECTED to the WORLD - - for Isaiah.

And Matthew has no place for BLAND SALT - - and UNLIT LAMPS.

By the way - - scientifically speaking - - SALT never really LOSES its saltiness - - or at least it is pretty RARE. / That's what I've read. / So if that's true - - this HYPOTHETICAL idea of BLAND salt - - is an EXAGGERATION. / Like - - whoever heard of SALT that LOST its SALTINESS??

And WHO would ever put a LIT LAMP - - UNDER something to hide the light?

Why not just put the lamp - - OUT?

It reminds me of something my JAZZ teacher once said:

David Friesen is a bass player and held clinics for other musicians. / At one of them he was trying to explain the importance of LISTENING - - when playing with a group. / When you play music with an ensemble - - it is important to LISTEN to the other musicians. / Don't; just play in time according to the metronome - - but establish the time - - by listening to each other. / And to illustrate this point he went over to the LIGHT SWITCH on the wall.

He turned OFF the lights in the room and pointed up to the bulbs in the ceiling.

He said those unlit bulbs were like a group of musicians just playing along.

BUT he said - - when they start LISTENING to each other - - the music goes from this - - to THIS - - and he SWITCHED ON the lights!

The POINT of a BULB - - or of a LAMP - - is to turn it ON!

The point of a light bulb - - is LIGHT!

It's kind of the OTHER meaning for the word END.

The END of something is BOTH the LAST point in TIME - - AND ALSO - - the PURPOSE of the thing. / So you could say - - the END of a light bulb - - is LIGHT.

Or the END of SALT - - is seasoning.

And Matthew PUSHES us to consider - - if we are living up to our PURPOSE.

What is your END - - your TELOS?

What is your purpose in life?

Are you doing anything about it?

How will your life - - END?

Will you be satisfied?

If the answer is - - maybe - - or nope - - then ask yourself this:

Would you like a SECOND CHANCE?

Both Matthew and Isaiah seem to think that there is STILL time - - for things to work out in the world - - as God would like.

But WHEN?

As we think about that question - - I have a story - - about a second chance...

Anne Lamont - - - describes her journey of faith in a book called "Travelling Mercies" - - and in the 55 page preface - - "Lily Pads"

She had not been raised in a religious family. / Had long felt drawn to God - - but it was something she RESISTED. / Especially Jesus.

She found the idea of being Christian - - completely impossible.

She wrote this - - about a terrible traumatic experience - - which turned her around:

"I got sober very quickly - - as I lay there - - and I became aware of someone with me. / Hunkered down in the corner. / I assumed it was my father's spirit - - whose presence I had felt over the years since his death - - when I was frightened or alone.

The feeling was so strong - - I actually turned on the LIGHT.

To make sure no one was there - - and of course no one was.

But after a while in the dark again - - I knew beyond any doubt - - that it was Jesus.

I felt him as surely as I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this.

And I was appalled.

I thought about my life - and my brilliant hilarious progressive friends. / I thought about what everyone would think - - of me becoming a Christian - - - and it seemed an utterly impossible thing - -

- - that simply - - could NOT be allowed to happen.

I turned to the wall and said out loud, "I would rather die".

One week later - - when I went back to church - - I was so hung-over I couldn't stand up for the songs. / And this time I stayed for the sermon.

Which I just thought was so ridiculous.

Like someone trying to convince me of the existence of extraterrestrials.

But - - the last song - - was so deep and raw and pure - -

- - that I could not escape.

It was as if the people were singing in between the notes.

Weeping and joyful at the same time.

And I felt their voices - or SOMETHING - rocking me in its bosom - - holding me like a scared kid - - and I opened up to the feeling - -

- - and it WASHED over me.

It washed - - - - over me."

For her - - this moment was a beginning.

Her life from that point was NOT perfect.

Later she was baptized - - and telling the pastor she did not feel good enough yet - - he said: “you’re putting the cart before the horse”

It takes time to become a NEW CREATION.

IT’s not the END of the story yet.

Baptism is just the beginning of a new chapter.

The END of the story is - - still out there.

What does it take for the story to end well?

In some cases a person’s EGO needs to be BUILT UP - - after being kicked in.

After a time of oppression of poverty or hunger...

But in other cases - - a persons EGO needs to be DEFLATED.

Humility - - can be a pathway - - to a better end of the story.

But it has to be GENUINE humility.

Not the FALSE humility described by Isaiah.

Think back to junior high school...

Imagine a student named Ted. / The disruptive - - unruly - - rebel student in the classroom. / Making nasty gestures in back of the classroom...

His teacher calls out to him:

“Ted - - that is a gesture known internationally! / But I don’t think ALL the other students could appreciate it. / Please stand up and do it for the whole class!”

Her strategy could backfire. / He could have showed off MORE.

But his teacher KNEW where Ted was VULNERABLE.

He turned red and was embarrassed.

Later when discussing the incident with another student she said:

“Don’t worry about your friend Ted - - he will probably turn out to be a pleasant and reasonable person - - in the END - - IF - - he is lucky enough to have a few more EOG-deflating experiences”.

So as we consider our OWN lives - - and our own friends and family - - in light of all this - - imagine the DAWN of another day.

As in the words of Rita Dove...which go like this...

“Imagine you wake up - - with a second chance:

The blue jay hawks his pretty wares

And the oak still stands, spreading glorious shade.

If you don’t look back, the future never happens.

How good to rise in sunlight,

In the prodigal smell - - of biscuits - -

Eggs and sausage on the grill.

The whole sky is yours to write on,

Blown open to a blank page.

Come on - - shake a leg!

You’ll never know who’s down there,

frying those eggs,

if you don’t GET UP - - and SEE.”