

Sermon: Being Salt and Light

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Feb. 8, 2026)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

On the cover of this week's bulletin, you will find an image, an photo of 'light from roof of Cardboard Cathedral', in Christchurch, New Zealand. The Cathedral's roof is composed of 96 cardboard tubes, reinforced with laminated wood beams, and with two-inch gap between them so that sunlight can filter inside. It is a singularly unique design, by the Japanese architect Ban Shigeru, built after the earthquake of 2011 which killed 185 people, devastated a large part of the city of Christchurch, and toppled the spire of its iconic 19th-century Anglican cathedral at the city-core.

After the quake and facing a long and contentious rebuilding process, the congregation needed an immediate, safe, albeit temporary solution for a place of worship. The architect Ban Shigeru was brought in and proposed an innovative design—a cathedral built of cardboards.

Shigeru is known as an “emergency architect”, having previously built cardboard structures for victims of natural disasters in Kobe, Japan, in Haiti and in Taiwan. His building philosophy, being consistent with his Japanese heritage, is that buildings are never meant to be permanent. Building are meant to serve a particular function, in a particular local, at a particular time. As long as these buildings are loved by the people they serve, even one built with mere paper can become permanent. Apparently, Shigeru was also willing to work pro bono, foregoing his fees. So the Christchurch Transitional Cathedral was authorized by the congregation, and within less than a year it was opened to the public.

The building itself is an A-frame structure, built on a foundation of eight 20-foot shipping containers. The roof and walls are supported by 96 massive waterproofed, and flame-retardant cardboard tubes, each about 20 meters long and weighing 120 kilograms.

Walking into the cathedral, one would undoubtedly be awestruck by the interior lighting, being illuminated by sunlight filtering through the gaps between the cardboard tubes and a large, colourful, triangular stained-glass window, paying tribute to the original cathedral's damaged rose window.

It is an immense, open and bright space, with a seating capacity of 700, serving not only the Anglican congregation, but also being used for concerts, conferences and community events. As the first significant building to open in the city following the earthquakes, the Cardboard Cathedral has become a symbol of hope, of Christchurch's resilience and creativity in its reconstruction.

Although originally intended to be a temporary solution, its design and structural integrity would extend its use for at least 50 years. Not permanent, but sufficient to serve its purpose, to shine, as a beacon of hope in that city.

In our Scriptural lesson today, in Matthew 5, Jesus proclaims, "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." He makes this startling revelation to a crowd of impoverished, meek and poor people, who were desperately hungry to be fed, both physically and spiritually. He makes this empowering pronouncement, right after blessing them with the Beatitude, of eight blessings that overturn the old world order.

He utilizes a grammatical construct that is common in Aramaic, the spoken language of his day, and shared in the Common Greek, the written language of the New Testament, of the emphatic second-person address of 'You'. Regrettably, none of the English language version of the Bible has picked this up (at least none that I have come across). A better dynamic translation with dramatic effect would sound more like this: "You, yes you! Don't look around at others, I am speaking to you! **You** are the salt of the earth. **You** are the light of the world. Yes you!"

Light, as a metaphor, is easier for us to understand. The examples used by Jesus are fairly relatable. A city built on a hill cannot be hid; people do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket.

Cities in ancient time tended to be built on elevated grounds, whether they be natural or man-made. Archeologists actually have a name for this—they call it a 'tell', or the accumulated debris of a succession of previous settlements at the same site.

However they were made, ancient cities were usually higher than their immediate surroundings. Even at night, the inhabitants' oil lamps would shed some glow over the night sky, and as such could not be easily hidden. In the same way, it is unthinkable to light a lamp and hide it under a bushel (I mean, what would be the purpose of that?). No, a lamp is put on a lamp stand to illuminate a household, or a wider area, to dispel and overcome darkness.

Light overcoming darkness is, to us, a daily event at dawn that anyone (or at least those who are able to get up early enough) could bear witness and be awestruck. Jesus is described, in the opening chapter of John's Gospel, as the "light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it". He is the great light that sets the example to all his followers, and we are the little lights shining in our particular corner, bearing witness in our particular context. When our light shines, other may come to see our good works, and in so doing, giving glory to our Father in heaven.

Being light is easier to parse, but being salt, on the other hand, is a little bit more difficult to comprehend. Salt was used in the ancient world to flavour foods, and in small doses as fertilizer. Above all else, salt was used as a preservative, to be rubbed into meat in order to slow its decay. What does it mean when Jesus asks, "*if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?*"

We know salt, through the science of chemistry, as sodium chloride. It is a fairly stable compound, and not likely to lose its taste. Salt in the ancient world was mostly derived from salt marshes, rather than by evaporation of salt water, thus containing many impurities. But even as such, the ancients understood salt as not likely to lose its 'saltiness'.

When asked what to do with unsalty salt, one rabbi advised, "Salt it with the afterbirth of a mule." Think of this for a second. Mules are sterile, they cannot give birth to offsprings, thus unable to have any afterbirth. The point this rabbi was making was that the question was stupid in itself. Salt cannot lose its saltiness.

However, the point that Jesus is making is this: if salt could lose its saltiness, what then would it be useful for? The answer is obvious: nothing! Of course Jesus was not giving us a chemistry lesson, he is using this to compare to a student who does not live out the values of his teacher. What then is the value of such an unsalty student? Not very much.

You are the salt of the earth! You are the light of the world! Yes you. Don't look around at others, at Pharisees, at teachers of the Law, at elders, pastors or ministers of the church. You, yes you are to be salt and light, in a decaying society, in a darkening world. There is nothing wrong with the Law and prophets as taught by teachers of the Law, by the Pharisees, by elders, pastors or ministers. Jesus did not come to abolish the Commandments but to fulfill them. The challenge, in Judaism and as in Christianity, has always been in the doing. The practices of faith, or praxis, bearing witnesses to who we are and who we are called to be.

Whenever we do good—sharing a cup of water, breaking bread with the outcasts, taking in a shelterless, or giving sight to the directionless—we are being salt, giving flavour of love, mercy and hope. Whenever we challenge the corrupt—advocating on behalf of the voiceless, righting the wrongs, upholding fairness and justice—we are being light to the nations, testifying to the kingdom values of the Kingdom of God.

Allow me to conclude my message with a prayer, that Laura has recently shared. This prayer is called “Lord, Make Me a Channel of Disturbance”, and frames itself as the “reverse St. Francis Prayer”.

The prayer of St. Francis, is commonly attributed to Francis of Assisi, though the actual author is unknown. It is a familiar prayer that we also sing in Hymn 740 of the Book of Praise. It starts with a plea to the Lord: “Make me a channel of your peace. Where there is hatred let me bring your love, where there is injury, your healing, where there’s is doubt, bring faith, where there is sadness, bring joy.” And so on, and so on. You get the gist.

It is a good prayer, praying to God so we could be a channel of God’s work of redemption. This reverse St. Francis prayer is even better, in my opinion. Praying to God to make us a prophetic voice and instrument of God’s justice and righteousness. The author is also known. Let us pray,

Lord, make me a channel of disturbance.
Where there is apathy, let me provoke;
Where there is compliance, let me bring questioning.
Where there is silence, may I be a voice.
Where there is too much comfort and too little action,
grant disruption.
Where there are doors closed and hearts locked,
grant the willingness to listen.
When laws dictate and pain is overlooked...
When tradition speaks louder than need...
Grant that I may seek rather to do justice than to talk about it;
Disturb us, O Lord.
To be with, as well as for, the alienated;
To love the unlovable as well as the lovely;
Lord, make me a channel of disturbance.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**