

GO! Up on a Hillside

We are in a series we started just a couple weeks ago entitled “GO!”, looking into the Gospel of Matthew. And the Gospel of Matthew, as we mentioned a few weeks ago, is a story that is on the go, it is a story in motion. We looked at how the terms “go” and “going” and “went” are used 149 times in 28 chapters which means there is somebody who is going somewhere at least 5 times a chapter. So there is kind of this sense of motion to the Gospel of Matthew as we go through it. And because someone is always going somewhere Matthew’s intent is that the reader would come to the story expecting to be taken somewhere along with the story. To be pushed or to be moved or to be nudged along a little bit with the expectation that they are going to end up somewhere other than where they started. And so, my hope is as we go through this study together that that’s our expectation as well: That this is going to take us somewhere and we are going to end up somewhere other than where we started out at.

Have you ever watched one of those TV shows or movies that just kind of start out with this big, long action sequence? Usually a spy movie or something like that. But there’s running and there’s jumping and there’s wrestling around. And there’s car chases and boat chases and plane chases. And there’s bullets whizzing by and there’s explosions everywhere. And there’s just this whole long sequence of action to open the show and the whole point of it to get the audience’s pulse racing, get them on the edge of their seat so they get into the story. To kind of hook them into the story so they are ready to watch the rest of the show.

Well, Matthew kind of does the same thing in his gospel. Now he doesn’t do it with action so much – explosions and what not – to do it, but his goal is the same and he wants to get the same response from his readers. Now, when we read the first part of Matthew we don’t typically have that same response because we are not first century Jews. And so we miss some of the point of what Matthew is trying to do. But this morning, as we get back into the flow of things again, I want you to put yourself in the shoes, or sandals as it may be, of a first century Jew as we look at this first part of Matthew’s story.

Now, get your brain in this place: For hundreds and hundreds of years you have clung to the promise that the Messiah is coming. And most of those hundreds and hundreds of years have not been good for you and your people. You have been conquered, and you have been oppressed, and you have been exiled and you have been enslaved. But the one thing that has carried you through is the promise that the Messiah is coming. God would send his chosen one to restore Israel to the glory of David & Solomon. He would make Israel a world power, if not the world power. He would defeat, destroy and disintegrate the Roman forces that are occupying your country. He would revive the spiritual dimension of Israel and He would make Israel the nation,

both physically and spiritually that everyone would look you and say “Now that is the people of God and I want to be part of that nation, because that nation is clearly God’s people.”

Which is why the one thing you have rested all your hopes and dreams on is it promise that the Messiah is coming. When troubled times come and bad things happen, you take comfort in the knowledge that the Messiah is coming. When hardships and burdens seem unbearable you take solace in the knowledge that the Messiah is coming. When you have to pay tribute and tax to Caesar or a Roman soldier barges into your home and demands to be fed or forces you to carry his pack for him, you cope with it all by focussing on the knowledge that the Messiah is coming.

Now, you’ve heard that a growing number of people are claiming that this Jesus of Nazareth guy is actually the Messiah. You’re not really sure how that works because from what you’ve heard the Roman’s executed him at the request of the chief priest and teachers of the law. So you’re not really sure where that puts you because if that is true it leaves really only two options. The first option is that Jesus wasn’t the Messiah. The second option is that Jesus actually was the Messiah, but you have rejected and killed him. And where would that leave you? Either the promise you have clung to was false. Or you may have just ruined the best chance you had.

And so you have come across a **copy of this book** written by a man named Matthew. And Matthew was a follower of this Jesus guy from the start. Matthew has written an account of the life of this man and **for whatever reason**: maybe you’re just **curious**, **maybe** you’re **looking for hope**, **maybe** you’re **a sceptic** who’s set out to disprove it all – but for whatever reason, you decide that you’re going to read it. And as you start out reading this book, here is what you come across:

In chapter one you find out that Matthew says that Jesus is a descendant of David and that ties him to God’s promise that David’s throne will last forever. And that’s important, but what’s even more important is that if Jesus was not descended from David that would disqualify him right off the start from being the Messiah. So it’s important that Matthew clarifies that off the start.

Secondly Matthew says that Jesus is also a descendant of Abraham. And of course everyone who is a descendant of David is also a descendant of Abraham, because David was a descendant of Abraham. So maybe that’s not much news, but the important part is that that ties this Jesus to the promise God made to Abraham and to the covenant God made with him that through him all nations would be blessed. And at the end of chapter one of the story, Jesus is born.

As we get into chapter two we have the visit of the magi. We talked about this a month ago back in December. And the magi were this order of priest and advisor type people from Babylon. They had come from a long distance away and they were know as

being king makers. They were the ones when there was no clear heir to the throne or regime change came, they were the ones that decided exactly who was going to be king. So they have travelled this great distance, lead by this miraculous star, to offer gifts to the person they say is the new born King of the Jews. And they were so convincing that paranoid old Herod decided he should slaughter all the baby boys two years and younger Bethlehem.

As we get into chapter three, Jesus grows up and he goes to see John, known as John the Baptist or John the Baptizer. Now you have likely heard of John, he gained a large following and some notoriety. And the truth is, as you think about it, John is probably the closest thing to a real prophet you have ever seen in your lifetime. And Jesus comes to John and John says "This is the man I've been telling you about. This is the one who's shoes I'm not fit to untie. Everybody follow this man."

And so, John baptizes Jesus and when Jesus comes up out of the water a dove comes down from heaven and rests upon him. And a thundering voice from heaven speaks. FYI, if a thunder voice from heaven ever speaks, it's God, you should pay attention. And so the voice speaks and says, "This is my son. Listen to him."

Chapter four, Jesus goes out into the wilderness by himself and for forty days he fasts and doesn't eat anything. At the end of the forty days, Satan comes to him. This is the text Cory talked to us about last week. And some people have drawn parallels between Jesus being tempted by Satan in the wilderness and Adam & Eve being tempted by the serpent in the Garden of Eden. And as a Jew you would be really familiar with that story and that symbolism and so that might have jumped out at you as you read this story about Jesus in the wilderness. But really the bottom line of this story is that Jesus stood toe to toe with Satan, went three rounds with him and won all three of them hands down.

Now, just to summarize what you've just been told in these first four chapters: Jesus is a descendant of David and Abraham, he was acclaimed by the magi, he was recognized by John the Baptist, he was endorsed by God and he was victorious over Satan. At this point, if you are a first century Jewish reader you have no choice but stop to catch your breath and collect your thoughts. Your heart is pounding, your adrenaline is rushing, your eyes are widening, and your head is spinning. And that's when you come to chapter five.

So, after rereading chapters one to four, just to make sure you got it all straight and it actually said what you thought it said, you dive into chapter five. And in chapter five Matthew is going to switch gears and the next three chapters are solid talking. If you have one of those red lettered Bibles that prints Jesus words in red letters you'll find that the next several pages are just all red. Except for the first two verses of chapter five and the last two verse of chapter seven this is all just Jesus straight talking.

This is one of several big blocks like this, where Jesus is just talking, in the Gospel of Matthew. One of the early Christian writers named Papias said, that what Matthew did is he went around and “collected the sayings of Jesus in the Hebrew language.” So when we look at the Gospel of Matthew he is more editor than author in a lot of ways. But he has gone around and gathered all these different sayings of Jesus and put them together. And he has put them together in big blocks or collections. And this collection which he has set right here at the beginning is here to set the tone for Jesus’ teaching throughout the rest of his gospel.

He begins with this section which Robert read for us earlier. And in this section Jesus begins by describing a new kind of lifestyle. A new way of living. He talks about people who live as if they were spiritually bankrupt and they recognize their need for God. He talks about people who mourn. And although God does comfort those who are grieving, in the context of this list – which is a spiritual list, more than a physical one - so right on the heels of being spiritually bankrupt and recognizing our need for God in many ways this idea of mourning carries with it a connotation of regret for sin and wrongdoing and mourning over those sorts of things. And he goes on and talks about people who are tender-hearted and compassionate. People who are passionate about seeing things get made right. People who show mercy and grant grace to others. People who’s hearts are pure and holy. People who make peace with others and between others. People who will do the right thing even if there are sometimes negative consequences for doing the right thing.

Now, don’t misread this list. This is not a buffet table where you get to pick and choose the things you find particularly palatable. You don’t get to come up and say, “You know, I could use a little extra blessing or happiness, so let’s see: I think I’ll take a spoonful of mercy; and a scoop of hunger for righteousness; but I’ll pass on the mourning and the meekness never really sits well with me so I’m just going to skip that.” No, that’s not what kind of list this is. This is more like an ingredient list if you’re baking a cake. Have you ever tried to baked a cake or something like that and forgot an ingredient or one of the steps along the way? Have you ever used baking powder instead of baking soda? Have you ever used a teaspoon instead of a tablespoon when you’re measuring out ingredients to put into whatever it is you’re baking? How’d that work out for you? Not so well. Matthew organizes his gospel to begin this first big teaching section and Jesus says “Here is the life I am calling you to:”

And here is where your English Bible does you a little bit of a disservice. We’ve talked about this before, but in your English Bible, between verses twelve and thirteen there is likely a big gap and then a subtitle “Salt & Light” and then another small gap and then verse thirteen will start. And that kind of gives us the impression that we have ended one section and we are about to start another. That one discussion has concluded and a new topic is about to be opened.

However when Matthew wrote it looked and read much different. First of all it was in Greek, but we're going to leave it in English this morning just so we can understand what it's saying. But there was no subtitle. There was no gap, it was all in one place. There were no verses – the verse numbers and chapter numbers were all gone. There was no upper case letters and there was no punctuation. So what Matthew originally wrote, aside from being in Greek, looked something more and read more like this:

Matthew 5:11 - 16 god blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers be happy about it be very glad for a great reward awaits you in heaven and remember the ancient prophets were persecuted in the same way you are the salt of the earth but what good is salt if it has lost its flavor can you make it salty again it will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless you are the light of the world like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden no one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket instead a lamp is placed on a stand where it gives light to everyone in the house in the same way let your good deeds shine out for all to see so that everyone will praise your heavenly father

There is no separation, no break, and no change in topic. Jesus' train of thought does not switch tracks between verses twelve and thirteen.

Which means this whole discussion of salt & light is directly related to the list of beatitudes Jesus begins with. In fact, living the lifestyle described in verses 3-12 is what MAKES YOU salt and light. You can not be the salt of the earth and the light of the world if you are not poor in spirit, or merciful, or pure in heart or a peacemaker. Verses 13-16 is a description of what happens when you mourn your own sin, hunger for righteousness and endure hardship for following God. In fact if you look at the Sermon on the Mount there are really two sections to it. The first one, verses 3-12 are kind of general principles of the Lifestyle Jesus call us to. The second section which goes from Matthew 5:17 all the way to the end of chapter seven gives us some specific examples of the Lifestyle Jesus calls us to. It talks about how to deal with anger & revenge; love & lust; integrity & judging others; giving to the needy; prayer & fasting; wealth & worry & wisdom. All of these things he discusses. And really the lynch pin between these two is this short section on salt & light. It is as if in Matthew 5:13-16 Jesus is saying "Here's what I'm calling you to be." And the rest of the Sermon on the Mount is "Here's how you do it. Here's what that looks like." Which makes these four short verses some of the most important in Matthew's gospel and some of the most important in understanding Jesus' message is for us.

So, in these four verses Jesus uses three different images to describe what he is calling people to be: the first is salt.

Matthew 5:13 "You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavor? Can you make it salty again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless."

What do you think of when you hear the phrase "Salt of the earth?" Have you ever heard someone say "Oh, you know, Phil, he's a really salt of the earth kind of guy"? What do you think of when you hear "salt of the earth"? (audience responses) Simple. A compliment. Great. Down to earth and grounded.

I'll admit to you, I've always struggled with this image a little bit and I'll tell you why: I don't like salt. I never put salt on my food. I don't cook with salt. I'm not really nuts about salty things. For a long time I didn't even put salt in water when I boiling it to make noodles or pasta you put salt in the water to boil it. I never used to do that until I found out that it boils faster with a little salt in it and my impatience won and so now I put a little bit of salt in. But I really don't like the taste of salt. My wife is super salt sensitive, at least from my perspective. I can't tell you how many times we've eaten a meal and I've said, "How was your food?" and her answer is "It was good, but it was a little bit salty." It seems to be her natural response to lots of things. So from my frame of reference salt isn't really a helpful image. I know some of you like to pour on the salt so that your meal is one part sodium, one part actual food, and that's your prerogative. But to me, salt is distasteful. It's blah. It's gross. I don't like it. So, to me salt that has lost it's saltiness is the best kind of salt there is. And throwing salt out on the sidewalk to melt the ice that is the perfect use for that substance. So why on earth would Jesus call us to be salt?!

If you've been around a while are likely familiar with this passage and have likely heard classes or sermons about being the salt of the earth before. I've heard my fair share of them too. And they usually talk about how salt is used to flavour food. Thus Christians should add flavour to the world. In other words bring good things to it. Or sometimes they'll talk about how salt is a preservative. Thus Christians should preserve the things that are good and right in this world. And I think both of those are valuable points to make. But this morning I want to offer you another angle to look at this analogy from.

It has likely never crossed our minds here in **lumber rich Canada**, but in many other places in the world firewood is **not so easy to come by** and Israel happens to be one of those places. In Israel you can find **small twigs and brush** at best, but that's about all you can find. So, **what do you use to fuel the fire** you need to keep warm or cook on? Well, the answer is: **Dung**! You use dung. Because apparently, camel dung and donkey dung has a lot of plant fibre left in it and that's really good for burning and cooking things. So what would happen and still happens in some areas of the world today, is some people, usually it's the young girls who get stuck with this unfortunate duty, but they go out in the morning and they **collect dung**. And they put it together and form it into these kind of cake sort of things and then they lay it in the sun to dry. And these would be used in open fires and sometimes in earthen ovens, kinda if

you've ever seen the old pizza ovens – the hearths with the fire inside, that kind of idea. And that's where these things would be used to cook food and what not.

They found out that there was a secret ingredient that would help make these dung bricks burn longer and hotter. Guess what that ingredient was? Salt! Salt was mixed into these camel cakes and then the dung brick was placed on a large block of salt inside the earthen oven and that's how your food was cooked. Although salt never loses its salty taste, after a while it will eventually lose its ability to act as a catalyst in these dung fires and the spent block of salt would get thrown out on the pathway, usually on a section that was especially mucky or whatever and then that was some place for people to step on as they went through the muddy little section of the path. Interestingly enough, in Aramaic – the language that Jesus spoke – the word for earth is the same word for earthen oven. So perhaps, one angle we can look at this from is that of the salt mixed in with the dung.

So, what message are we suppose to take from this rather unsavoury dinner description? First, if you're a Christian don't be upset that you are being asked to get mixed into dung. Second, if you're not a Christian, we are in no way insinuating, implying or inferring that anyone who is not a Christian is dung. That is not what we're saying, so please understand that. What this analogy is suggesting however is that Jesus has called his followers to be a catalyst in the world around them. To interact with them in such a way as to generate a positive and dynamic reaction. To be involved in the world around us in a way that adds value and makes things better. To create change that improves the lives of the people and communities around us. And that is what Jesus has called us to be. Hang on to that thought as we look at our second image.

The second image Jesus uses to describe what he is calling people to be: the city on a hill.

Matthew 5:14 "You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden."

Now, as I thought about it, this doesn't really apply very much in Saskatchewan because a city anywhere can be seen from a long distance away because that's just the terrain of our land. But when we first went to Vancouver we observed what I thought was one of the weirdest things. When you looked up in the night sky – and often visitors would come and see this same thing and say "What are those weird lights up in the sky?" And it really looked like this runway going up into the air, just in the middle of the sky. And at the time they were still filming X-files in Vancouver, so we were thinking "Whoa, is there something weird going on here?" Cause there's just these lights way up in the middle of the sky. And eventually what we found out was they were the lights for the ski hill up on the mountain. And we could see them from where we were miles and mile away. But the coolest thought about that, when I pondered it this week, was I was not actually seeing the lights up on Grouse Mountain.

That light was coming from the mountain miles and miles away, across the city, right to where I was. And I was seeing the light where I was, because it was come to where I was. Hold that thought for a minute.

The third image, very similar to the second, Jesus says:

Matthew 5:15 - 16 No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a bowl. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house.

In ancient Israel there were **no electric lights** so at night it was dark all around. So at night when the sun went down, it was dark. Perhaps you've been in a place like that. Been in a campground where there is no electric lights, so when the sun goes down it is daaark if you don't have your own flashlight or something. Maybe you've been in a widowless basement at night time when all the lights are off and found that pitch black where you can't see anything. I remember on trips to India, there's lots of places out in the outlying areas where there's not electricity, at least not a lot of it, and so when the sun goes down it is dark and you can't see your way around.

People in Israel would have lamps, somewhat like this. They were filled with oil and had a small cloth wick on them. And these lamps would be put up high on a lampstand and because most of the first century homes, the simpler ones anyways were only one or two rooms a well-placed, well-lit lamp could light the whole house – at least give enough light for people to get by. Jesus also mentions putting the lamp under a bowl, and we talk about that and talk about it hiding the light. But the truth is, if you put a lamp under a bowl, it doesn't hide it – it extinguishes it. Maybe at home you have one of those dainty little candle snuffer thingies, the same idea. Putting a bowl over a lamp extinguishes the light.

Last week Cory talked about the power of the dark side. Today we get to talk about the power of the light side. Here is the power of the light: Light spreads, glows, illuminates, stretches, reaches, pierces the darkness. Light always impacts the environment around it. A light bulb never just illuminates the area of the light bulb, it lights the surrounding area as well. The light and warmth of a fire radiate out from the actual flame. My watch has a light on it. The light is meant to allow me to read the time in the dark. But it has also allowed me to find light switches, door knobs, mp3 players and my way through a room. I've read by the light of my watch because the light glows outward impacting the darkness around it.

So, what message are we suppose to take from this rather illuminating illustration? First, if you're a Christian don't be unnerved that you are being asked to go out into the darkness. Second, if you're not a Christian, we are in no way insinuating, implying or inferring that anyone who is not a Christian is in the darkness because they are dumb or blind or evil. That is not what we're saying. What this analogy is suggesting however is that Jesus has called his followers to be a light in the world around them. To stand out and shine. To radiate and warm. To reveal and reach out.

As individual Christ followers we are the flame of a single lamp that is lifted up in our homes and our neighbourhoods and our schools and our workplaces and our shopping malls and our hockey rinks and our restaurants and roadways giving light to everyone around us. Shining goodness and God's love into their lives.

As a church we are a collection of lights, a city on a hill if you would, a city that doesn't just shine and invite people to come see it, but light that moves out from here and into the lives of: the poor, the disenfranchised, the suffering, the lonely, the hurting, the abused and the forgotten. Shining goodness and God's love into their lives

All three of these images point us toward the same thing: Jesus is calling his followers to live in such a way that impacts their world, that reaches out to those around them and that changes things for the better.

It has been suggested that the church is designed by God to act as a greenhouse. To be a places where life is lovingly warmed, cared for and nurtured. And it is built with glass walls so that the light from inside can shine out and those outside can look in and see the work of the gardener and the care that he is giving to the plants inside. But one author warns that too many churches have replaced their glass walls with mirrors. And so now, no light shines out; no one can look in; and all that those inside can see is themselves.

So the question for us this morning is, are the walls of our church glass or mirrored? Are the walls of my life glass or mirrored? Does the way I live and act and interact with others around me impact people for better or worse. Am I a light to those who's lives feel dark? Do I reach out into the world or hide away from it?

It happens in everyday situations. In big and small ways. A week or two ago I ask via Facebook for copies of an article suggesting that church goers are the worst tippers. I was shocked and somewhat dismayed by how many people responded and by the plethora of articles that flooded my inbox. I even got testimonies from former wait staff confirming the myth. One of the best articles reads in part like this:

If you have ever worked in the restaurant industry you know the reputation of the Sunday morning lunch crowd. Millions of Christians go to lunch after church on Sundays and their behavior is abysmal. The single most damaging phenomenon to the witness of Christianity in America today is the collective behavior of the Sunday morning lunch crowd. Never has a more well-dressed, entitled, dismissive, haughty or cheap collection of Christians been seen on the face of the earth. I exaggerate of course. But I hope you see my point. Rather than pouring our efforts into two hours of worship, bible study and Christian fellowship on Sunday why don't we just take a moment and a few extra bucks to act like a decent human being when we go to lunch afterwards? Just think about it. What if the entire restaurant industry actually began to look forward to working Sunday lunch? If they said amongst themselves, "I love the church crowd. They are kind,

patient and very generous. It's my favorite part of the week waiting on Christians." How might such a change affect the way the world sees us?

And that's just one small area of life. What about the way we treat our fellow driver? I shamefully admit and confess that I am a much better driver on Sunday morning than I am the rest of the week. On Sunday morning there is no tailgating. No mumbling under my breath. No banging the steering wheel or shaking my head in hopes that the guy who just cut me off looks in the mirrors and sees my disapproval. No, on Sunday morning I'm a generous, kind, forgiving, pleasant and cheerful driver on Sunday mornings. Why? Because, I'm worried that the car I feel like running off the road, might actually be one of you, or worse yet a visitor who is coming to our church on Sunday morning and in a few minutes they are going to see me up here talking about God's love. And I'm worried about what terrible effect on there opinion of me, but more importantly of our church and most importantly about our God.

What if. What if everywhere I went and in everything I did I had that same realization? The way I treat this waiter will effect their view of Christianity and God. The way I treat the person in front of me in line at Wal-Mart, or the cashier at Wal-Mart will effect their view of Christianity and God. The way I deal with this neighbour will effect their view of Christianity and God. The way I interact with this co-worker will effect their view of Christianity and God. The way I care for the poor of our city will effect their view of Christianity and God. The way I help those in need will effect their view of Christianity and God. The way I forgive those who have wronged me will effect their view of Christianity and God. The way I welcome those from other places will effect their view of Christianity and God. The way I share/hoard the blessings I've been given will effect their view of Christianity and God. The way I interact with the people around me or don't interact with them, will greatly affect their view of Christianity and God.

You may have noticed the arrows we've been constructing on the floor in the aisles the last couple weeks. What you may or may not have noticed is that you have to be standing with your back to the stage and your face toward the exit to properly read the words. This is no accident. As we go through Matthew's gospel there are going to be many lessons that Jesus will teach us, but you will find that many, if not most of them will require us to go out those doors and into our communities, into the lives of those who live in our city. Jesus said,

Matthew 5:13 - 16 "You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavor? Can you make it salty again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless. "You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a bowl. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.

Go back and read the rest of the Sermon on the Mount and consider it as an instruction manual for accomplishing the mission Jesus gives us in these four short verses and see what sounds different to you than it did in previous readings.

Jesus says, your mission is to be salt and light. Your mission is to impact the world around you in positive ways. Your mission is to change things for the better. Your mission is to affect the lives of people you come in contact with in a way that will draw them to Him.

Are you ready to go?