Spirituality
Scripture for Life



Chef Elijah Amoo Addo and cook Angel Laryea of Food for All Africa prepare free lunch to reduce food waste and feed those in need in Accra, Ghana, June 3, 2022. (CNS/Reuters/Francis Kokoroko)



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At some point around middle adulthood, many people begin to feel the itch of new/old questions about life. A man may realize that having been a star at football or chemistry has lost its luster. A middle-aged woman figures out that looks don't count for much at all.

As achievements are losing their luster, niggling questions arise: What are we doing here? What's the difference between satisfaction and joy? Between achievement and meaning? Between career and vocation?

Those questions, all the same in the long run, are the thread that weaves through today's readings.

Feb. 5, 2023: Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 5, 2023

Isaiah 58:7-10
Psalm 112
1 Corinthians 2:1-5
Matthew 5:13-16

Isaiah, or whoever wrote chapters 40-66 of the Book of Isaiah, wanted his readers to think critically about what they considered a good, meaningful life. He used practical examples to describe the path to personal fulfillment and the way to offer genuine light to the world. For Isaiah, as for the author of Psalm 112, the just person possesses a light that leads them through dark periods even as it shines for others to see.

Paul will tell the Corinthians that being light has nothing to do with fancy words or intellectual showmanship. It's as simple and as countercultural as Christ crucified, as unpretentious and as challenging as was Jesus' life for others.

Paul's reflection leads into Jesus' description of disciples as light and salt for the world.

This week, our readings from the Hebrew Scriptures give the most detailed description of what is entailed in being living lights.

Isaiah's instructions are quite striking when we ponder them. He tells us to share our bread with the hungry, to shelter and clothe those who are vulnerable in any way and to never turn our backs on our own. Isaiah's subtext comes down to saying that we need to treat everyone in need as one of our own, as our clan, as the people to whom we owe first allegiance.

Psalm 112 continues that theme, emphasizing that the just person is a light in the darkness of an unjust and cruel world. Those who treat needy others as members of their family are people whose experience of goodness and trust in God has freed them from fear of want, from the need to accumulate what others need for survival.

These people can lend in such a way that they create an honest and trusting society. They shall not be moved from their unshakeable trust in God. Their heart is firm in the conviction that all are one. Because they know that what happens to one happens to all, they can share and trust that they will never go hungry if another has something to share.

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It takes little to realize that these messages apply to communities, not just to individuals. The community Isaiah wants to build, the community that we, too, are called to build, will bring a new dawn to the world.

Isaiah tells us that when we treat another's need as our own, we create the kind of society that reflects the very glory of God. In such a society, no cry for help goes unanswered — not because God swoops in, but because the people of God live their vocation to reflect and effect God's love.

This is exactly what Jesus, the Jewish preacher, was talking about when he called his listeners to be salt of the earth and light for the world. Jesus knew Isaiah's teaching and he prayed the psalms. He realized that neither salt nor light exist for themselves, but to call attention to something else.

As salt and light, the people of God do not simply note the needs of others; they prove by their activities that such needs can be addressed and alleviated. Their light demonstrates that the reign of God is a real and growing phenomenon in our world.

This brings us back to our questions about our own lives. Isaiah, Paul and Jesus want their people to live in joy and to know meaning. In short, they want people to understand and find the fulfillment of living their vocation — of discovering what they were made for and how they can best use the gifts they have been given for the good of the world.

That is the simple and countercultural truth about why we were created.

The Sunday readings we will hear from now until Lent invite us to keep asking about the good life — about the reign of God in our midst.

We can begin today by asking ourselves when we have experienced real joy and depth. When we look at those moments, it may surprise us to see how closely they align with the type of activities Isaiah suggested, how much they are actually experiences of the reign of God in our midst. Remembering and contemplating that will be enough for this week.

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