

Lightshine

Isaiah 58:1-6; Psalm 86:1-10; Matthew 5:14-16

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Jesus had just been teaching the multitude of people gathered on the mountainside by the Sea of Galilee. It is traditionally known as the Sermon on the Mount, and it was the most extensive teaching session that is recorded in the Gospels. Some of the best known content of the teaching is the Beatitudes.

After the crowd has dispersed and the disciples remain with Jesus, He turns to them and continues his teaching. He says to them “You are the light of the world; you are the salt of the earth.” When Jesus says “you are” it is the plural form of the Greek and Jesus addresses his words to the disciples around Him and it comes down through the centuries to all of us who are his followers. Jesus says to them, and to us, that this is who you are, not what your potential is, or what your desire is to become, but who you are simply because you follow Me.

No matter the generation, there has always been a need for those who will be light, be illumination, about the need for righteousness, the need for right living, for those who are in this world. Sometimes the light of God’s people grows dim. Sometimes the wick needs to be trimmed so that the light will burn brighter. Sometimes God confronts.

As it was with the people of Israel, so sometimes it is in this present generation. The activities may not be the same, but the attitudes may be. The people of Israel had returned to their homeland following their release from captivity in Babylon.

Isaiah records their complaint against God and God’s response to them. They have been observing the rituals of the Law regarding repentance from sin and fasting and they are asking why God is not blessing them as they expect God to do. They have become a complaining community. Their fasting is not acknowledged; their prayers are not answered.

God gives them a response through the prophet Isaiah. The prophet identifies for them a disjunction between their religious practice and their actual actions of injustice.

The prophet gives God’s message to them, “I’ll tell you why! Because you are living in evil pleasure even while you are fasting and you keep right on oppressing your workers. Look, what good is fasting when you keep on fighting and quarreling? This kind of fasting will never get you anywhere with Me. Is this what I want—this doing of penance and bowing like reeds in the wind and putting on sackcloth and covering yourselves with ashes? Is this what you call fasting? No, the kind of fast I want is that you stop oppressing those who work for you and treat them fairly and give them what they earn. I want you to share your food with the hungry and bring right into your own homes those who are helpless, poor, and destitute. Clothe those who are cold and don’t hide from relatives who need your help.”

The prophet continues, “If you do these things, God will shed God’s own glorious light on you. God will lead you; your godliness will lead you forward, and goodness will be a shield before you, and the glory of the Lord will protect you from behind. Then, when you will call, the Lord will answer, “Yes, I am here.”

All you need to do is to stop oppressing the weak, and to stop making false accusations and spreading vicious rumors! Feed the hungry! Help those in trouble! Then your *light* will shine out from the darkness, and the darkness around you shall be as bright as day. (The promises continue.) Isaiah 58:3b-10 TLB)

During this month we will be looking at ourselves, our country, and its history, as it has dealt righteously, and unrighteously, with our African American sisters and brothers. We must confess that our light has not always shown forth our good works. Hopefully, knowing our history, we will determine not to repeat the same.

During the month of February we celebrate Black History Month, a time when we look at persons and events that have made a difference in the life of our Black sisters and brothers. Today we look at one of the significant events in the Civil Rights movement. Today we will look at the desegregation of the military.

Since the time of the American Revolution Black soldiers have fought for this country, but until after World War II they fought in segregated units. By the early 1940s, war-related work for World War II was booming but most Black Americans weren't given the better paying jobs. They were also discouraged from joining the military. After thousands of Black people threatened to march on Washington to demand equal employment rights, President Franklin Roosevelt issued an Executive Order that opened national defense jobs and other government jobs to all Americans regardless of race, creed, color or national origin.

Black men and women served with distinction in the military during World War II. Among the most famous were the Tuskegee Airmen. It was thought that Black men could not fly airplanes, but a group was sent to Tuskegee College to be trained. The rest of the story proved the truth of the matter. They became the first Black military aviators in the U.S. Army Air Corps. They earned more than 150 Distinguished Flying Crosses. Many of you had the honor of knowing one of those Tuskegee Airmen, Wally Higgins, who was a member of this congregation.

Toward the end of World War II, on April 12, 1945, President Roosevelt died and Harry Truman became President. It would be an interesting turn of events, both for Truman and the Black military. Truman was known by his closest friends as a white supremacist. He grew up in a home where his grandparents had owned slaves. His family despised abolitionists, reconstruction, and Abraham Lincoln.

At the age of 21, when Truman was a Corporal in the Missouri National Guard, he wrote to his future wife, Beth Wallace, saying, "I think one man is just as good as another so long as he's honest and decent and not a Negro (he used the "n" word), or a Chinaman. I am strongly of the opinion that Negroes should be in Africa, yellow men in Asia, and white men in Europe and America.

Now Truman was President of the United States and soon the war came to an end and soldiers were returning home. Black leaders declared that Black men and women would never serve in the military again as long as they were segregated.

Winfred Lynn, a black landscape gardener was jailed because he refused to serve in a unit of the military that was labeled as Negro. The arrest, beating, and blinding of Isaac Woodard, an African American veteran by police in Batesburg, South Carolina, helped to inspire Truman to move toward desegregating the military. Woodard had just been honorably discharged and still was wearing his uniform when the

police singled him out. Truman would come to say, "My stomach turned when I learned that Negro soldiers were being dumped out of military trucks and beaten in Mississippi.

In 1947 Truman became the first President to address the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in a speech at the Lincoln Memorial. In his speech he said, "It is my conviction that we have reached a turning point in the long history of our country's efforts to guarantee freedom and equality to all our citizens." Truman would later campaign in Harlem, the capital of Black America. That would help secure the Black vote and help win a second, full term for him as President. Truman's views on civil rights divided the Democratic Party. Democrats from South Carolina, Mississippi, and Alabama walked out of the Democratic National Convention.

On July 26, 1948, Truman signed an Executive Order desegregating the military. The Secretary of the Army balked at integration, declaring that "the Army is not the instrument for social evolution." Truman forced him to resign. Complete desegregation was reached six years later, in 1954, with the deactivation of the 94th Engineers Battalion.

On the 50th anniversary of the desegregation of the military General Colin Powell would say, "The military was the only institution in all of America--because of Harry Truman--where a young black kid, now 21 years old, could dream the dream he dared not think about when he was 11. It was the one place where the only thing that counted was courage, where the color of your guts and the color of your blood were more important than the color of your skin."

The desegregation of the military was one step on a very long journey toward equality and realization of the Beloved Community that was described by Dr. King.

Matthew records the radical teaching of Jesus that challenges us to be not just nominal followers of Jesus, but to be his hands and feet and heart and agents of change within this world. It may not be easy; it may not be popular; it may not necessitate our being people in authority; but it will always call us to be faithful to let our light shine to overcome the darkness where we find it.
Amen.