



**Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany**  
**February 5, 2023 + Matthew 5:13-20**  
**"Memphis, Once Again"**

Memphis. A city that, as a national news story just said, has always had a front seat to the brutal consequences of slavery and racism. A combustion chamber of trauma. A city whose name, especially for the past 55 years, has rung with echoes of

tribulation for all who are passionate about racial justice.

On April 3, 1968, Martin Luther King arrived in Memphis and checked into the Lorraine Motel. The week before he had led a march there in support of a strike by city's Black sanitation workers that unexpectedly turned violent. Captured by national media, the disaster threatened to tarnish King's entire movement. So to prove he could organize a peaceful march, he decided to return to Memphis a week later.

His arrival was greeted with a barrage of death threats, but supporters still poured into the cavernous Mason Temple that night as strong storms rolled in. King's speech was unremarkable until near the end, just as the storm was cresting and a tornado destroyed 40 trailer homes north of Memphis. "I don't know what will happen," King said. "We've got some difficult days ahead."

"But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I have seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight, that we as a people, will get to the Promised Land.

"So I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!"

The crowd was clapping, cheering, crying. King stumbled off the podium into the arms of his friend Ralph Abernathy and other preachers who were also crying. The next day, April 4, King was assassinated on the balcony of his motel. Memphis.

And now this same gong has been dealt another crushing blow. Once again it is shaking us to the core as the specter of racism and its brutality clangs in our collective brain. Once again it is shattering the cone of silence under which our creature comforts tempt us to hide: Why should I worry about other people, when I have everything I need?

This instinctive retreat is exactly why we must let ourselves be shaken, because we do NOT have everything. Mainly, we do not have peace, when something like what happened to Tyre Nichols can take place, something that random, horrendous and apparently unprovoked. We must let ourselves be shaken, because as we know so well, injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. Whatever affects one of us affects us all.

As in Martin Luther King's last speech, today's refrain also has to do with a deep desire for place, a place where God's justice reigns and love is the law of the land. The place we're hearing of today is not the promised land King glimpsed from the mountaintop, but simply "home."

Today's refrain is, "I'm just trying to go home." Tyre Nichols was just minutes from home when he was pulled over. Between blows he gasped, "I'm just trying to go home."

LaToya Yizar, whose mother was Tyre Nichols' godmother, was inspired to create a poem on this refrain She read it at his funeral on Wednesday:

*I'm just trying to go home. Is that too much to ask? I didn't break any laws along this path. I've skated across barriers designed to hold me back.*

*I'm just trying to go home, where the love is loud, and the smiles are warm, like the sunsets that come from me in the codas of my storms.*

*I'm just trying to go home. I hear the sirens, I see the flashing lights. The directions are clear: black skin go left, blue skin go right.*

*I'm just trying to go home. Don't I deserve to feel safe? Batons, badges, boots, bright lights against my face.*

*I'm just trying to go home. Does anyone hear the pain in my cry, the struggle in my breath? God replied, 'Come home my son, now you can rest.'*

Where is our home and how do we find our way there? In today's Gospel, home is not a place but a set of qualities, salt and light, realized in time. We are home, at home in our discipleship, when we express these. Being salt and light equips us to be bringers of the kingdom, the ones through whom the reconciliation of all things is accomplished, little by little.

Light we understand, and we'll sing about that shortly. But how are we to be salt? (And by the way, Jesus' followup question is a little trick – salt can never lose its taste.) So consider these two properties of salt as potential ways of being:

- Salt is the most powerful flavor enhancer and modifier known to humankind. It unlocks aromatic compounds and reduces the perception of bitterness by bringing out other flavors.
- Salt is a great diffuser. When a piece of meat is salted well before cooking, the grains dissolve and move inward to create a chemical balance. In cooking, the salt also allows the protein strands to retain water so that the meat ends up being juicier, which of course is the theory behind brining.

How can you be salt -- the salt of the earth?

- By being salt, your joyful energy enhances the flavors, or forces, of good in the world. and reduces the impact of the bitterness and negativity around you.
- By being salt, your bright spirit is diffuser of strife -- a great conciliator. You become, in Isaiah's words, "the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in."

In his short life, Tyre Nichols was salt in the joy he sprinkled onto everyone and everything. Of his passion for photography one friend said, "He was trying to find a way to make those good times, those good memories, last as long as humanly possible." In his relatively short life, Martin Luther King, Jr. was salt in his passion for justice. Nothing could diminish his saltiness, not even that devastating setback with the first Memphis march; in fact, he went directly from there to invite the world onto the mountaintop.

Each of you is also salt. Each of you has it in you as a God-given gift. So be bold, be salty in your own unique way, and let's bring in the kingdom together. Amen.