

A Covenant of Salt

TEXT: Numbers 18:8, 19-21; Matthew 5:13

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on January 26, 2025

We're preparing to explore what God is calling us to do by first looking at what God is calling us to be. But even before we look at what God calls us to become, we find the biblical passages that describe what we already are—the things that God has placed within human beings by our very nature that will enable us both to become what God has called us to be and to do the more specific things that God has called us to do.

The first of those things that Jesus declares all humans to be—a part of our physical being, no matter our faith or life choices—is salt. Human beings, like all mammals, need salt to live, and yet our bodies are unable to manufacture it. And since we also need water to live, that presents us with a dilemma. Salt will retain water; but too much salt will retain too much water and we end up with high blood pressure, heart disease, damage to many organs, and stroke. Salt also pulls calcium from our bones. But with too little salt, we get muscle cramps, nausea, dizziness and eventually shock, coma, and death.

Since taking in all the water we need to keep our bodies at full functioning washes out the salt, we have a delicate balancing act in our diets to make sure we get *enough* salt, but not too much. Tipping the scales too far in one direction or the other can give us major health problems and, if it continues, kill us.

But beyond our own health, salt has many, many other uses and forms. Saltpeter is a gunpowder; salt has antiseptic and anti-inflammatory properties and can be used to help heal bug bites. Very early in human medical practice, those properties were put to use in helping to heal wounds with salt water, and saline solutions are still used in medicine to clean wounds and promote healing.

And yet, salting a field is a war tactic used to destroy fertile soil, kill crops, and make land unable to sustain life for many, many years. And today, good old Morton's salt, a 3.2-billion-dollar company, only does 8% of its business producing table salt. The vast majority of their business is from salt's de-icing properties, especially on roads.

Salt, of course, adds flavor, but perhaps its most valued use, outside of our own bodies, is salt's ability to preserve. From ancient times, Egyptians used salt to preserve mummies, and once it was discovered that salt could preserve food, everything changed.

Nations and empires rose and fell according to their ability to corner the market for salt. Much of the earth, and almost all of the cod in the world's oceans were laid waste in the process; while, on the other hand, many were only able to live by having a saltworks of some kind within their borders. The English word "salary" comes from the Latin word for salt, because salt was so valuable that it was literally used for money. Preservation is a tricky and nuanced business.

When Jesus addresses the crowds before him during the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, and tells them that they are the salt of the earth in verse 13, he references some of that complexity by saying that, once salt has lost its essential quality, that batch can't really be restored.

You can't salt the salt. You have to throw it out and bring in salt that is uncompromised; just like in the human body where we are constantly excreting salt and constantly needing to replenish that supply. But we need the Goldilocks amount. Too much or too little and we're dead.

Much of Jesus' teaching focused on that need for balance between our need to *consume* our metaphorical salt and our inclination to preserve it. Many of his parables are targeted at those who preserve too much while others have too little; and history shows how that instinct, allowed to run unchecked, has led us to the inequities that plague us and destabilize our world today.

But, centuries before Jesus was telling people they were salt and warning them not to lose salt's essential qualities, God was periodically offering Israel a "covenant of salt," providing a model and metaphor that I think can be useful to us as we struggle with today's challenges.

Bernadette read us the first description of God making a "covenant of salt" with Israel from the book of Numbers, the fourth book of the Bible. The book of Numbers gives us stories from the time after the drama-filled

escape of the enslaved Israelites from Egypt and after receiving the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai but before entry into the Promised Land.

In the book of Numbers, we find the Israelites, in their second year after leaving Egypt, coming to the very border of the Promised Land. In Numbers, we get the stories of the people complaining to Moses they don't have enough food, so God provides manna. And then they complain that manna every day is boring and God provides quail.

Different groups of people become discontent and stir the pot, trying to boot Moses from leadership and God steps in multiple times to establish that Moses, and later his brother Aaron, were the ones God had chosen to lead them. In-between those uprisings, Moses and Aaron are laying out systems of worship and governance for the people, based on the laws given to Moses at Sinai.

It was the largest of those rebellions, which happens in Numbers 16, that leads to God getting really fed up and deciding that all but one of the thousands of Israelites who left Egypt will die without ever setting foot in the Promised Land; and God leads them, not into the land whose borders they have just reached, but back out into the desert for another 38 years.

But right at that juncture—at the border, with a rebellion in the ranks—God steps in to make very clear that Aaron, and his descendants after him, are indeed the ones God has chosen to structure and lead Israelite worship. Chapter 18, where this morning's passage is from, is the passage that sets apart Aaron and his descendants, the tribe of Levi, as priests over Israel; and establishes the system of tithing. Those from the tribe of Levi will be responsible for preserving worship in Israel.

God seals that promise to Aaron and the Levites with a covenant of salt. It's a promise to preserve the priesthood through Aaron and his descendants. The only other time we find mention of a covenant of salt in the Bible is in 2 Chronicles 13, where there again was rebellion in Israel, this time over the kingship.

One of those vying for the throne makes his case by referencing God making a covenant of salt with his ancestor, King David, promising that all future kings of Israel would come from David's line. It's the same concept. A covenant of salt in the Bible is God's promise of preservation, the most valued property of salt.

Jesus, a descendant of David, would have been familiar with both the concept and the particular uses of the covenant of salt in ancient Israel. And I think by telling those who came to hear him on the hillside that all of them are the salt of the earth, and by warning against losing salt's essential quality, Jesus is expanding the idea to a new covenant—which is what the word “testament” means. The New Testament is just as easily called the New Covenant—not one that replaces the old, but one that builds on what has come before.

At his last meal with his Disciples, Jesus refers to the wine as his “blood of the new covenant.” And what is blood? Water, salt, and proteins. The Gospel itself is the ancient covenant of salt, mixed with the actual flesh and blood of humanity in Jesus. No longer simply a covenant between God and one tribe or lineage; through Jesus, God has made a covenant of salt with every human being who walks the planet.

We are the salt—the means by which God has chosen to preserve the earth and the Gospel of God's love for all within it. And we are the ones who must guard against our salt losing its flavor.

Jesus' life showed us how to keep that essential quality—to preserve, yes, but not for the mere sake of preserving, and not to preserve only for some—to preserve so that all may share equally in God's bounty from generation to generation.

To preserve the Gospel message so that it might be shared with those who are starved to hear it. Like those on the mountainside in Matthew 5 who were starved to hear that they, the poor, were blessed; that those who gave mercy would receive it in return; that God would take as God's own beloved those who work for peace.

St. Francis famously said, “Preach the gospel at all times; when necessary, use words.” The healthiest way to provide life-giving salt to the world and keeping everything balanced is through our actions. But, like Jesus on the hillside, there are also times when the salt of so many has lost its essential properties that it must be poured out in words in the hopes of preserving life itself.

Last Tuesday morning, in a small, invitation-only service for the new administration at the National Cathedral, the Episcopal bishop of Washington DC, the Right Reverend Mariann Edgar Budde, poured forth the salt of the

Gospel, directly into the vessel of the President of the United States and others poised to serve him. Here are the final words of her sermon, which have since gone viral.

“Let me make one final plea, Mr. President. Millions have put their trust in you and, as you told the nation yesterday, you have felt the providential hand of a loving God. In the name of our God, I ask you to have mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now. There are gay, lesbian and transgender children in Democratic, Republican, and Independent families, some who fear for their lives.

“The people who pick our crops and clean our office buildings; who labor in poultry farms and meat packing plants; who wash the dishes after we eat in restaurants and work the night shifts in hospitals. They...may not be citizens or have the proper documentation. But the vast majority of immigrants are not criminals. They pay taxes and are good neighbors. They are faithful members of our churches and mosques, synagogues, gurudwaras and temples.

“I ask you to have mercy, Mr. President, on those in our communities whose children fear that their parents will be taken away. And that you help those who are fleeing war zones and persecution in their own lands to find compassion and welcome here. Our God teaches us that we are to be merciful to the stranger, for we were all once strangers in this land.

May God grant us the strength and courage to honor the dignity of every human being, to speak the truth to one another in love and walk humbly with each other and our God for the good of all people. The good of all people in this nation and the world.” And there she ended.

For proclaiming that Gospel message, in a simple request for mercy; she has become a target, vilified directly by the President on down on social media and cable news. Some have suggested that the government should seize the National Cathedral. People called the bishop Satan, wished her dead, and one, in all seriousness, posted a warning to his Twitter followers to “Beware the sin of empathy!”

“Empathy” was my star word from our service on December 29. I never dreamed I would have to explain to people that empathy was a virtue, not a sin, or that mercy and compassion are central features of Christian faith as it has been preached for 2,000 years, not some new political ideology. But here we are.

But what surprised me, and what gave me hope, was the way that not only she, but the Christian faith she so simply and elegantly represented, became a beacon of hope and light—not just for Christians, but across the theological spectrum.

People began not only sharing her words and praising her courage, but linking to her latest book, published in 2023, titled, *How to Learn to be Brave: Decisive Moments in Life and Faith*. And not just Christians. Self-proclaimed atheists were sharing the link and saying they were buying that book.

One woman wrote, “I just started listening to Bishop Budde’s book. She reads the audiobook. I’m not religious at all, but am finding it comforting and helpful in these tumultuous times.” I don’t think the bishop’s publisher was ready for this. The book has been sold out in every book outlet, from Amazon to local bookstores, ever since.

The gospel was preached in that one short paragraph, added almost as an afterthought earlier that same day; and even those who had never set foot in a church instantly knew the truth of it. Some were stung by her light and lashed out, while others stepped into it, washed with joy. Bishop Budde remembered her covenant of salt—to preserve the Gospel and make sure it was not forgotten throughout the land. And, in the moment when it mattered, she kept that covenant.

Most of us will never have that kind of opportunity. But Jesus said every one of us is the salt of the earth—an agent of preservation in a world slipping through our fingers. And so, I invite each of us to ask ourselves, “What will I preserve? What will my covenant of salt look like?”

I share a covenant of salt with Bishop Budde to preserve the Gospel through ordained ministry. But I have a more personal covenant of salt to proclaim the sacredness of God’s creation by preserving and nurturing everything that grows, walks, flies, swims, or crawls.

You may have your own spheres of influence where you can make a covenant of salt—a covenant to preserve something or someone that represents the Gospel message to you. If you are a lawyer or politician, you can make a covenant of salt to preserve the law and speak the truth.

If you're a librarian, you can make a covenant of salt to preserve the free access to all books. If you're a teacher you can make a covenant of salt to preserve the information in your field. If you're a carpenter or machinist, you can make a covenant of salt to preserve the best practices of your craft, the accuracy of your accounts, the safety of those who use your products.

Regardless of your profession, you can make a covenant of salt to preserve the dignity, respect, and freedom of your family, friends, and neighbors. For that matter, you can make a covenant of salt to preserve your own self-worth as one who is beloved of God. We can all find some area where being the salt of the earth can be exercised to preserve and protect a piece of the sacred whole.

But a covenant of salt is not strictly an individual exercise. We, as a church, exist for the primary purpose of preserving the Gospel in every age and place and time. While clergy and church leaders have their own individual covenants that intersect with that, the Church is all of us; and we all are part of that larger covenant of salt that Jesus offered with his blood. Bishop Budde on Tuesday spoke for herself, but she also spoke on behalf of the Church as an institution, proclaiming Christian values as the bishop who presides at the National Cathedral in our nation's capital.

One of the many executive orders signed by the President on his first day in office was an order that stripped church sanctuaries of the function that gave them that name.

Before last Monday, houses of worship, along with schools, libraries, hospitals, and shelters for those fleeing domestic violence were designated as "sensitive zones," places where Immigration and Border Patrol agents could not detain and arrest people, so that all community members could access basic services and support without fear. Those places were Sanctuaries. That restriction was removed last Monday.

In response, the office of the Attorney General for Massachusetts and the Massachusetts Office of Immigrants and Refugees are offering a training for religious leaders this coming week, so that we can understand which laws are still in force around such actions and how to calmly and legally respond if any action is attempted in our own houses of worship.

I'm registered for that training and have asked all staff and members of our Church Council to also register. There'll be a similar training for congregants at another time, and I'll pass along that information when I have it. The training is supported by our bishop and is being hosted by the Massachusetts Council of Churches and the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Boston. I'm also in conversation with other clergy in Winchester.

Empathy is not a sin; Jesus singled out the merciful for special blessing; and "The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt" is a Bible verse. If we can't uphold those values, we are, quite simply, not worth our salt. Amen.