

For thousands of years humans have been pondering deep questions like, Who are we? Why are we here? What are we meant to be doing? How are we to go about this thing we call life? These elemental questions, according to Huston Smith in his classic book, *The World's Religions*, are the questions that form the basis of all human religious yearnings.

I remember as teenagers we used to laugh about questions about the meaning of life, probably because we had seen the Monty Python movie called "The meaning of Life", which was basically just a series of comic sketches about the various stages of life. Yet even as we laughed, we asked these questions about meaning and purpose. My best friend and I used to talk especially about the why: Why are we here on planet earth? What is our purpose?

Our own culture told us, and tells us still, that our purpose is to come out on top and to win the race. Having more and doing more are touted as tickets to belonging in our society. If you don't have much and aren't deemed successful, then you become invisible, silenced, discounted. Think of those who have to sleep outdoors and who cannot afford a home. Think of prisoners. Unless we decide to reach out to include them, we will go out of our way to ignore them, choosing to walk on the other side of the sidewalk so as not to have to encounter someone who is suffering there.

We have good reason for this kind of avoidance. Facing precarity and suffering is unnerving. Any of us could land there, actually, and that thought is just too scary. Plus, we often don't know how to help. In 2008, presiding bishop Katherine Jefferts Schori opened a summit on poverty by asking three questions:

1. How can we help break the cycle of poverty?
2. How can we become a place of refuge and healing for the most vulnerable members of our society?
3. How might we be a prophetic voice for those who find themselves stuck in dead-end situations?

In our search for freedom and abundance in life, we have to include those who are on the margins, yet most of us remain enslaved to three verbs, as Evelyn Underhill explains in *The Spiritual Life*: “to Want, to Have, and to Do. Craving, clutching, and fussing, on the material, political, social, emotional, intellectual – even on the religious – plane, we are kept in perpetual unrest: forgetting that none of these verbs have any ultimate significance, except so far as they are transcended by and included in, the fundamental verb, to Be: and that Being, not wanting, having and doing, is the essence of a spiritual life” (p. 20).

What does it mean to be fully human? There is a famous Latin phrase from St. Irenaeus: “Gloria Dei est vivens homo.” The glory of God is the living human. But Irenaeus didn’t stop there. The phrase continues: “vita autem hominis visio Dei” – the glory of God is a living human being, and the life of the human consists in the vision of God. In other words, our life and our flourishing consists in beholding God.

I would take that further and say that not only does our life consist in beholding God, but also consists in being beheld by God. It is a mutual gaze of trust, love, and caring. Jesus beholds the disciples and tells them that they are salt and light. We are salt and light – and as such, we are capable of fulfilling all that God requires of us.

Isaiah helps us to imagine what it really means to engage in religious practices, for example, what it means to observe a fast: “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly... Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.”

Some five hundred years later Matthew’s Jesus confirms, our light, the light of Christ, the light of God’s purpose, shines brightest when we do just these things (cf. Matthew 25:31-46). This is the essence of our Being. This is why we are here in a world in desperate need of more light. This is how to fulfill our Being light: by reconciliation. By striving for justice and peace and dignity for all people – not

some people, not most or a lot of people—all people. This is what it means to be the salt and light of the earth.

Jesus sees us like the salt that makes everything taste good. He shows us that love is to make up the very essence of who we are and why we are here. We come from Love, we return to Love, and Love is all around.

The Apostle Paul calls us to consider what it means to be “truly human” in his Corinthian correspondence: “We speak God’s wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written, ‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him, these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit.’”

Yet, the “rulers of this age” continue to keep us busy Wanting, Having, and Doing; craving, clutching and fussing “on the material, political, social, emotional, intellectual – even on the religious – plane,” kept in perpetual unrest. The secret and hidden wisdom of God calls us to recall the essence of life.

The essence of our being is that we are made of salt, water, and stardust. Knowing this reminds us where we come from, where we are going, and how we are to live, which all revolve around Love—restoring justice, peace and dignity for all people in a world that too often wants us to believe it is every man, woman, and child for themselves. This is why Underhill invites us to stop all else and take time to simply Be – for it is in taking time to recollect the essence of being truly human that we are set free to be who we are meant to be and to remember how we are to live.

The elements of creation, like salt, water, light, and stardust – acts of kindness and love for all creatures great and small – define the very essence of who we are and whose we are, which Jesus sums up in just a few words about salt and light. When we live lives of justice, peace, and dignity for all people and all of creation, says the poet Isaiah, “Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly.”

There is healing from all that seeks to keep us in a state of perpetual unrest. Isaiah imagines what that looks like. Paul asks us to remember what it means to be truly

human. Jesus beholds us and sees us as the salt of the earth, and the light that shines upon others so that they might join us in giving all glory to our God, whose property is always to have mercy, who sets us free and gives us the liberty of that abundant life made known to us in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

The bulk of this sermon, in structure and content, comes from <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/salt-light-and-stardust-epiphany-5-a-february-9-2020/>