

**February 8, 2026—The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany**  
**The Rev. James Wyatt**

## **Light of the World**

The Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Junior, in his famous speech during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963—his “I have a dream” speech—talked about how the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence made promises about the equality of all people that American society did not fulfill. He said “the architects of our republic ... were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir... a promise that all [people], black... as well as white... would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” And then he said, “It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note... America has given [Black] people a bad check...” and “we have come to cash this check.”<sup>1</sup> He might as well have said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. I have come not to abolish, but to fulfill.”

Because to fulfill something, well, literally it means to make it full—more broadly, to make it whole or complete. Dr. King saw that the promise contained in the founding documents of our country held a promise that was not being fulfilled. He didn’t want to throw out the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence—he wanted the nation live into them more fully. He wanted their promise fulfilled.

In the same way, Jesus—who was steeped in the Scriptures of the law and the prophets—saw their promise, the abundance of life that God promises to God’s people, and came to cash that check. Jesus refused to believe, even in the face of Roman occupation, that the bank of God’s justice was bankrupt, to use Dr. King’s metaphor, or that there were insufficient funds in the great vaults of God’s mercy and justice and love. “I have come not to abolish, but to fulfill.”

When Jesus goes on to say that not a letter or a stroke of a letter will pass from the law, it’s easy to get caught up in thinking about the letter of the law—to imagine that Jesus is saying we should be following strict food restrictions, and doing no work on the Sabbath and stoning our drunkard children, as the law requires. But remember, this is the same Jesus who scandalized religious leaders by healing on the Sabbath and eating with the wrong people and touching the impure and being a glutton and a drunkard, as they said. So unless he’s a hypocrite, I don’t think that “fulfilling the law” is the same thing as “following the letter of the law.”

On the contrary, the people that Jesus calls hypocrites are the people who do follow the letter of the law, but miss the point of it. They’re the people who use the law as a weapon against each other, to define who’s in and who’s out, who’s clean and who’s unclean.

Right after this passage in Matthew, Jesus goes on to talk about how he interprets the law: he says it’s not enough to follow the law against murder, we need to keep our hearts free from the angry thoughts that lead to murder. He says it’s not enough to follow the law against adultery, we need to keep our hearts free from the lustful thoughts that lead to adultery. He says it’s not important to guard against unclean things going into our bodies; we need to guard against the unclean things that come out of our hearts. And so on.

Too often, the law is used to enforce an idea of holiness that’s all about setting things apart. But I think the fulfillment of the law is about finding the ways it brings us together—nurturing just relationships in our communities, showing mercy instead of judgment, and loving each other as God loves us. I think the fulfillment of the law means transforming the law from a set of rules that tell us what we must and mustn’t do into a way of thinking, a way of being, a way of forging relationships between people built on justice and mutual service.

The prophet Isaiah in our first reading this morning calls the people of God to a fast—not a fast from food, according to the law, but a fast from injustice, a fast from bondage, from

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<sup>1</sup> [Read the full speech here](#) or [listen to it here](#)

blame, from slander, from poverty and oppression. That's what holiness is for—not to make ourselves feel righteous but to guide us in building a community that looks more like the kingdom of God.

“Share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house... Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,” Isaiah promises. And Jesus says, friends, “You are the light of the world.” You just are. You carry the light of God, the light you have seen in Jesus Christ, and that light shines out from you as inevitably as light from a burning candle. Wherever you go, no matter how dark this world gets, you carry that light with you.

But wait! There's more! You are also—all of you—the salt of the earth. You just are! You have tasted and seen how gracious God is, and you carry that grace with you, too, bringing flavor to the world around you—as well as preservative properties!

You—all of you—are the light of the world and the salt of the earth. That is who you are. And it's up to you to decide what to do with that fact.

You can try to hide that light away, put it under a bushel basket, keep it from illuminating the darkness around you. But why would you do that? The world is too dark already—it needs all the light it can get. No, Jesus' invitation is to put your light on a lampstand “so it gives light to all in the house,” to “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to [God] in heaven.”

You are the light of the world—each one of you, and all of you, all of us, together. Every “you” in this Gospel lesson is really a “you all,” it's plural, addressed to the disciples and all the crowds gathered around him on the mountain. We are the light of the world, we are a city built on a hill, too bright to be hidden from view. The light that shines in this place—the light of hospitality, the light of equality, the light of service to our neighbors, the light of love and justice and peace—the light of God can't be hidden under any bushel basket.

Like Dr. King and like Jesus before him, we know that the fulfillment of God's promise is not a bad check drawing on insufficient funds. The light of God's love that shines through all our readings in this season of Epiphany is abundant and rich and true—it shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. It shines in us.

Whatever you do, friends, let your light shine. Tend and nurture the light in you, seek God's face, in whatever way works best for you, so you can bask in that light, fill yourself up with it and carry it out into the world. Let your light shine. Because the world needs that light so desperately—the light of God's love, the light of hope, the light that illumines a better path forward for this broken world. Let your light shine.

Amen.