“The light of the world.” What an evocative phrase! Ernest Hemingway even used it for the title of a short story. It’s no mere coincidence that it’s included in our collect today, in this season of Epiphany, the season of light.

While that noun “light” appears hundreds of times in the Bible, the particular phrase, “the light of the world,” only three. Twice in John’s gospel, once in Matthew’s, each time the phrase is placed in the mouth of Jesus himself.

The first scene in John is dramatic and familiar to us all: Jesus speaks to a crowd about to stone a woman to death as a result of their judgment of her. He tells them, famously, “Let anyone without sin throw the first stone.” As they come to their senses, or to themselves, Jesus says, “I am the light of the world.” And then, “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” His light has shone on their common humanity. He assures the woman, and most notably the crowd, that they have emerged from this dark moment, that they are all forgiven and loved. And of course by doing that he reassures all of us that we, too, will come through our dark episodes, led by this loving light.

In the very next chapter John recounts the healing of a blind man. In the midst of restoring the man’s sight, Jesus says, “As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” It is a startling and liberating physical fact for the man who is suddenly able to walk in the light, and to all of us a reminder that the light of Christ will light our way as well.

What remains is the first occurrence of the phrase, in Matthew’s gospel. First in the order of composition (Matthew was written before John) and in sequential order in the Bible. The context is the Sermon on the Mount, specifically, the Beatitudes. After pronouncing blessings on the poor in spirit, on the mournful and meek and righteous, the merciful and pure in heart and the peacemakers, Jesus blesses those who are reviled and persecuted. He is speaking to those who encounter many of the dark places in life. And, addressing that last group—those who suffer for doing the right thing—Jesus pronounces our phrase, “the light of the world.” But this time, and remember, it’s the first time we come upon the phrase, he says, “You are the light of the world.”

And as surprising as that three-letter word might be, he says a another one. It came to me this morning, or probably during the night when I was asleep (a kind of epiphany), that this little word points toward the meaning of the whole of the gospel, of our faith. Jesus says, “Let your light shine.” And he goes on to say that this is the way the love and mercy and grace of God will be made known in the world. It is, among other things, a reminder that we are all made in the image of God, that we in our natural state radiate that love. The invitation here is to allow that to happen, remembering that it is God acting in us and through us—our part is to allow that to happen, to get out of the way of God’s grace moving through us.

What a fitting description of our calling on this day of our annual parish meeting. Rather than talk about your good works—and there are many—this morning I give thanks to God for being part of this little light shining in Burnet, Texas, and well beyond, in all the lives touched by yours. You are the light of the world. + + +