

## Past Sermons

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany  
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We began by praying that God “set us free from the bondage of our sins, and give us the liberty of that abundant life made known to us in our Savior Jesus Christ.” As we proceed through the various Sundays of the epiphany season, we are exploring the many ways that God is revealed in the world, most particularly in Jesus. We are discovering again just what that abundant life is for us.

In the reading from Isaiah, the prophet almost seems to be chastising us for not understanding it all already. “Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning?” It is as though he is calling us fools for not perceiving the magnificence of God laid out for all to see and understand. But of course we are human and prone to forget, prone to get lost in ourselves and shut off from the wonders of God’s creation.

In terms of “abundance of life” Isaiah talks of how in the ordinary course of things even the youngest and strongest become tired, “but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” So abundance of life is offered to everyone who trusts in God, rather than in their own might and cleverness.

This abundant life promised by God is definitively revealed in Jesus. The moments of epiphany, of revelation, vary greatly in their tone and splendor. At our midweek service this week we celebrated Candlemas, the Feast recalling the moment when the 40-day-old baby Jesus was presented in the Temple and recognized by Simeon and Anna, two aged servants of God, as the Messiah, the Chosen One of God. This was a dramatic event and we celebrated with incense and solemnity, blessing all of the candles to be used in the church for the coming year.

By contrast today the revelation seems very matter of fact, more or less a day in the life of Jesus the wandering preacher. This might seem unremarkable, but of course it is not. God is revealed in the very ordinariness of Jesus’ day to day life. Like anyone else, he goes to friends’ houses, but in this case his friend’s mom is sick, unable to offer the normal hospitality. Jesus takes her by the hand and she gets well, immediately returning to the ordinary round of getting everyone something to eat and drink, making them welcome. The healing is a miracle, is a revelation of divine concern for our ordinary suffering, but it is shown in the midst of the normal round of life. The sickness interrupted life, the healing restores it to its normal course. In this we find that God does not just come to us in spectacular, top-of-the-mountain flashes of glory, but in our ordinary lives.

Jesus' ordinary day-to-day life includes not only restoring life in Simon Peter's house to its normal functioning, but also time to heal the physically ill and mentally ill who come to him, whether he knows them or not, whether they are worthy or not. Jesus' ordinary daily life consists of this persistent restoration of health and well-being. The evangelist does not go into great detail, but merely mentions the healings, thus making them seem part of the fabric of daily life, nothing unusual at all. They are so usual, so much the stuff of daily life, that Jesus must make an effort to take time out to pray, as well as a little bit of time to explain and time to spread the word.

So we see in Jesus God's love and generosity flowing through the normal course of human life. And we know that the life we see revealed in Jesus is the life we are meant to live. Like Jesus, we are meant to live lives filled with healing, with prayer, and with exploration of God's meaning for us.

What does this look like? If I walk into the house of a person who is ill, will the mere touch of my hand banish their illness? Not usually. If I speak to someone who is mentally ill, will they immediately be freed of their affliction, will their demons be banished? Probably not.

But if I go to the bedside of people who are ill, spend time with them, live out the love and concern of God for their suffering, there is healing in that. It can make a profound difference in their living, whether they are cured of the illness or not. Similarly, if I fully engage with people who are mentally ill, treat them as people loved by God and by me, there is healing in that. It can banish the demons of loneliness and isolation at the very least.

What is revealed in this weekend's readings about the abundance of life offered in Jesus tells us a lot about how we are to live that abundant life. It is not a life of solitary magnificence, or of spectacle. It is a life of full engagement with the people around us.

If we go to visit our friend, we also pay attention to his mother-in-law ñ that is, to the people who work at the restaurant where we eat with friends and family, to the people walking the same streets or driving the same freeways. Abundant life, the life of those who follow Jesus' revelation toward full reconciliation with the Father, affects everyone it touches. We are meant to be alert, like Jesus, to everyone we encounter, to notice their needs and respond to them.

Jesus brought healing of all sorts, which included the casting out of demons. This is understood in a whole variety of ways: healing of mental illness and of psychological suffering, literal exorcism of demonic possession, and particularly ridding our common life of all of those things which separate us from full reconciliation with one another and with God. This last is a very important part of the life to which Jesus calls us, and is a part often too easily ignored.

In the baptismal liturgy, those to be baptized and their sponsors renounce “all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God; the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God, and all sinful desires that draw [them] from the love of God.” These are the demons we are called to cast out, as part of our ordinary life, as part of our following of Jesus into abundant life.

How aware are we of the demons around us? How often do we ignore them? The demon, the spiritual evil, of racism has been much on all our minds with both the recent celebration of Dr. King’s birthday and the death this week of his valiant widow. Do we just acknowledge and lament it ñ or do we work to cast it out? Jesus, I believe, would have us be the ones who work actively to cast it out.

What about lesser demons, such as scorn, or indifference, or rudeness? It is my belief that we are meant to cast these out and thus claim abundance of life for ourselves and for everyone around us. Each time we celebrate a baptism we all promise to “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves.” Part of the revelation, the epiphany of this particular set of readings is that Jesus met each person in love and service, demonstrated in his gift of healing, the love of God for each individual, family, and community. When we see Christ in the other, we are also seeing the lovability of each person, the image of God in each person, the need for love and community in each person.

When we bring someone into the Body of Christ through the sacrament of Baptism, we are claiming that abundance of life for them. We are inviting them to share what we have found. We are offering them the epiphanies of God in Christ loving the world into life.

So this week’s epiphany is a revelation of God’s love for us and everyone, and of how we are meant to live it out, not in demanding miracles, but in daily, constant, and consistent service to the people God places in our paths. Paul makes this clear in his claim to “have become all things to all people, that [he] might by all means save some.” He was constantly aware of the state and circumstances of each community and person he met, always looking for the way to meet them where and as they were, in order to introduce them to Christ, to show them the path to the Father. That is our calling as well.

Finally, today’s gospel reveals that the abundant life lived in the footsteps of Jesus must include moments of prayer, however hard they may be to carve out of our busy schedules. Jesus was busy. People around him continually demanded his time and attention ñ and yet he always remained insistent on the necessity for quiet and for prayer. We cannot have fullness of life without it.

Time to pray and think and work for understanding. Today (the first Sunday in February) is officially theological Education Sunday for the national church. On this day we are commended “to recognize and celebrate those places where life-changing Christian learning is experienced and valued and to encourage active participation by all in the search for knowledge of God.” This is part of what we see Jesus doing and calling us to do in today’s reading.

It is an abundant life, if we are willing to embrace it.

Finally, a lovely, and appropriate, prayer from our Candlemas liturgy:

Blessed are you, O Lord our God, for you have sent us your salvation. Inspire us by your Holy Spirit to see with our own eyes him who is the glory of Israel and the light for all nations, your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, ever one God, now and for ever. Amen.