

Sunday January 12th, 2020
Epiphany II

PRAYER: O Lord, rekindle your spirit within us; make us burn with your power and love. Increase our faith; set us ablaze with courage, that we might fulfill our calling before you and our neighbours-not simply because you command it, but because we demand it of ourselves. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE: God has delivered us from dominion of darkness and given us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Let us give praise to God, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

OFFERTORY CALL: All that we have and ever hope to have is a gift and a trust from God. The Apostle Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 4:2 that as stewards of what God has entrusted to us, we have only one responsibility. Paul writes, “Stewards are expected to show themselves trustworthy.” Let us demonstrate that we are worthy of God’s trust in giving us worldly goods as we offer to God our tithes and offerings.

PASTORAL PRAYER: O Christ, who sensed the danger of depending upon others but did not hesitate to brave that danger; who knew the pain of rebuking friends but did not hesitate to risk that pain; who counted the cost of discipleship but did not hesitate to pay that cost: O Lord, we adore you. You are our Lord, before whom we bow in awe and gratitude, and our Teacher, to whom we turn in need and expectation. As you have taught us the meaning of lordship, teach us the meaning of discipleship; teach us what it means to be members not simply of the church but of your body. This is not the first time we have approached you as disciples seeking guidance. We have approached you many times, and each time you heeded our request. But we did not always heed your counsel. You urged us to honour those who serve God by sharing their faith, but we coveted the honour for ourselves. You reminded us to warn against the consequences of evil deeds, but we feared the scorn of evildoers. You exhorted us to treat all persons alike, in the world as in the church, but we played favourites in the church as in the world. You have not failed us, Lord; we have failed you. So, we come to you, asking for another chance-not a second chance but a third, fourth or fifth chance. We ask for grace to hear and heed your voice; for the fortitude to comfort and correct our friends; for the determination to respect and to rely on others; and for the courage to count and pay the cost of discipleship. We are not ignorant of the demands of discipleship, but we have not done justice by our knowledge. Help us, O Christ, to do as well as we know and, better yet, to do the greater works you promised we would do.

We thank you, dear Lord, for greeting us as brothers and sisters; for making us disciples to one another in your spirit. Grant us the grace to be open to one another, so that when one rejoices, we all rejoice, and when one suffers, we all suffer. As the world learned of your lordship by your love for us, let the world learn of our discipleship by our love for one another. Rekindle within us the gift of God; stir within us the spirit of power! Bless us, and in faith and love we will proclaim your truth.

BENEDICTION: The road is long. Let us walk it with integrity of heart-seeking God and scorning evil; loving good and loathing corruption; rendering justice and righting wrong. Let us walk confidently in the power of heaven, remembering one another constantly in our prayers and honouring one another continually with our lives. Amen.

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1 Peter 1:12-25

Series: The Christian Life Experience

“Watch Your Step!”

I have come to experience, and honestly believe, that much of this world's deeper truths only come to us as we grow older and live our lives. Point in fact is that for a long time I was very familiar with the story of Don Quixote. A man who envisioned himself a brave knight, fighting dragons, and saving his beloved princess, Dulcinea. Where Don Quixote saw a castle with turrets and magnificent gates, his ever-faithful companion Pancho Sanchez saw only a dilapidated inn.

In a poignant scene of the story, Quixote stands before the inn waxing eloquently about the magnificent structure he sees. Pancho Sanchez who is very confused by all this, carefully, and with great detail, shares with Don Quixote what he sees. Quixote responds “Stop! I will not allow your facts to interfere with my vision!” Frankly, for a long time I just didn't get the point of this story.

That is until some years ago I read what Tony Campolo wrote about his experience of going to see the musical based on the story of Don Quixote entitled *The Man of La Mancha*. Campolo was enjoying the musical, when he was disturbed by the woman next to him who whispered emphatically to her husband, “Stop that! Stop that! You're embarrassing me!” Campolo leaned forward and looked at the husband.

He was a properly dressed man with all the symbols of middle-class wealth and status. The only thing unusual about him was that he was sobbing uncontrollably. Campolo writes, “I knew why he was crying. It was because the man on stage, Don Quixote, was singing the theme song “To Dream the Impossible Dream”. He was singing about beating the “unbeatable foe” and striving with courage to go where the brave dare not go.

He was singing to the audience that the world would be richer because “one man bruised and covered with scars,” still strove with all the courage he had to reach an unreachable star. The man was crying because he had lost his dreams. Somewhere along the line, he had lost his visions.” (Let Me Tell You a Story, pp.70-71) I get the point now. How many people today, experience on a regular basis the question, “Is this all there is”?

Call it a midlife crisis; call it whatever you like, but the reality is many have lost their vision. Many folks struggle to find a reason for life itself, let alone even getting up in the morning. Perhaps that is why so many people take such an interest in the lives of celebrities and sports figures. They are acting as if their own lives are neither worthy of people's interest, nor are their daily pursuits of any value.

If the Christian life is nothing else, it is clearly an offer by God to dream the impossible dream. The Christian life is meant for us to live and see beyond the mundane nature of life, and embrace something far grander than we could imagine. Yet, when we consider our experience as Christ's followers, most of us would be hard pressed to claim it is anything close to a grand adventure.

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Sadly, we would be apt to use words like mundane, and boring, to talk about spiritual matters. I think I have figured out at least part of the reason we drift in this direction. Our Puritan roots as Protestants, has for hundreds of years approached a passage like this one from 1 Peter, and narrowly defined what being holy is about. Now to be fair, Peter himself seems to take a certain track when it comes to living a holy life. He mentions self-control and avoiding slipping back into our old ways.

Holiness therefore has come to mean, for many of us, a moral code, or ethical approach to life. Now there is some truth to this. Living a holy life does include living a life that honours God. It means becoming more and more like Jesus. We can all agree on this I am sure, but in preparing for today I did something I should have done a long time ago. I actually went and researched the word “holy”.

Frankly, I admit, as a kid who grew up in a church, and has spent most of his life in church circles, holy is a word I thought I knew fairly well. Holy is a regular and integral part of our religious vocabulary. I use it frequently. It crops up in many of our beloved hymns, and when people use it in speaking to me, I am pretty sure I know their intended meaning.

However, in my research, I have discovered that I don’t know this word very well at all. The word “holy” has a far richer history and depth of meaning than I could have imagined. First of all, I’ll state the perceived obvious meaning. Holy means virtually the same thing in many cases as the word sanctify, which is closely related to the word sacred. It refers to something that is special, set apart, or religious in nature.

This is how we use the word when speaking about God, or how God used the word when he spoke to Moses. “Take off your sandals; you are standing on holy ground.” This meaning of the word is rarely meant to apply to people, instead the second meaning is what you and I hope to attain to. The word holy comes from the old English word *Halig*. This word halig in turn likely is very closely related to the Scottish word “hale”.

Now this word you may be familiar with. A proper greeting in Scotland, some years back, might include the question “how are you”? The reply might include the phrase, “I am hale and hearty.” It is this word hale that should grab our attention, for this is the full meaning of our word holy. Hale means that a person is healthy, whole, uninjured and robust.” It means a person is “right as rain”, has no complaints, and can take on the world. Or as my grandfather said, “I am able to sit up and take nourishment”.

Being holy means therefore that we are hale. We are healthy, whole, and robust. Jesus expressed it in a more familiar way. He called it, “the abundant life”. Yes, the holy life is about ethical and moral behaviour, but it is so much more. Remember Zacchaeus and his encounter with Jesus. His new ethic or new morality, was not the only blessing from meeting Jesus, nor was it even the most critical.

The joy and peace, and new birth Zacchaeus felt, was what really stole the show.

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Yes, Jesus can make you a better person, and many of us originally turned to him for just such a purpose, but he seeks first and foremost to make you a whole person. Jesus seeks to make our lives robust. We need to recapture this grander vision of what the holy life is. This is especially true, if we find ourselves facing the kind of persecution the early church did. I mean the kind of church congregation; which Peter seeks to address.

Think about it. Why would anyone endure severe persecution in following Jesus, if all it meant was a bolstered list of “thou shalt not’s”? The holy life comes not out of what we do or don’t do. I realize that this line of thinking has major ramifications for social issues and how the church responds to them. A holy life comes from being the favourite evangelical phrase, “born again”.

The Apostle Paul was very clear in his writing that we cannot earn the holy life by following the law, because we will fall short every time. The holy life is a gift from God. It originates out of his grace.

Peter’s concern in today’s passage is what Eugene Petersen refers to as the “sloppy life”. I really like this description, because it captures Peter’s concern in a way we may not soon forget. The “sloppy life” is just as it suggests. It is a life that is: chaotic, unfocused, undisciplined, neglected, lazy, frankly a mess. And if we are not careful, a sloppy life can become so habitual that we think it is the only way of life and we get comfortable.

The image that comes to mind as an illustration, is the homes and lives depicted on the show *Hoarders*, where people accumulate so much stuff that their homes become unlivable. The people profiled in these shows are miserable, but cannot bring themselves to make the necessary changes to improve their lives. They are trapped in a situation of their own making.

In the case of those who suffer from a hoarding disorder, intervention by family and mental health professionals is necessary. In terms of seeking a holy life, we need an intervention as well, which God timely provided by giving us his Son Jesus to ransom us and deliver us from our unholy or sloppy life. The issue remains however, that we underestimate the value of what we have.

Some years ago, at the Tucson Gem and Mineral Show a gem dealer was perusing the dealers who had set up at the show. The man stopped at one particular booth because he happened to see a violet stone the size and shape of a potato. He looked the stone over checking the price tag and casually asked the vendor, “You want \$15 for this”? The seller realizing the rock wasn’t as pretty as others in the bin, so he lowered the price of the stone to \$10.

Guess what? The stone has since been certified as a 1,905-carat natural star sapphire; about 800 carats larger than the next know biggest stone. It was appraised at 2.28 million dollars. Clearly it took someone who knew and loved precious gems to recognize the value of what the seller had.

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It took the Lover of our Souls to look into each one of us and recognize the value of what lay in us and the willingness to pay the price to redeem us. (Fresh Illustrations for Preaching, p.171)

As we examined in last week's passage, Christ Jesus seeks to purify our faith, to refine our lives. But having been refined, we do not want to clutter it back up or get sloppy. One of the regular contributors in the Toronto Star that I do like to read, is the little column called, "The Fixer". The idea behind the column is that Toronto residents can call in with some hazardous, unsightly, or malfunctioning aspect of the city's infrastructure. So, people email, or call in locations of: bad roads, faulty lights, tripping hazards and also badly neglected pieces of public artwork.

In almost every case, the problem exists because of lack of maintenance, or lack of follow up. Somehow the deficiency has occurred because it was not on someone's to do list. Sometimes, problems persist because no one knows who is responsible for the issue. Is it the city, Bell Canada, a private company or person? Frankly, this stuff happens because people get sloppy in their attention to detail.

In our lives we too need to be vigilant. We need to be aware of the Holy Spirit's nudging that something needs our immediate attention. We need to be aware of the rust, weeds and potholes that are forming in our own lives and in our collective life together. The signs of a problem are clearly evident. Peter tells us that a lack of sincere love for each other is a sure sign we are not as holy as we could be.

Please notice he wrote sincere love. That adjective sincere is crucial. It indicates a love that is honest and truly heartfelt, not something contrived or faked because we think it is the Christian thing to do. I get a kick out of a little cartoon I have in one of my books about a church board meeting. It depicts the secretary of the committee reading the minutes of the previous meeting.

She reads in part, "And so the meeting was adjourned and closed with prayer. Then the members retired to the parking lot to say what they really felt." Are you receiving sincere love or better yet are you dispensing sincere love? If not, then perhaps this is the cause of our lives not being as abundant as we long for. Our faith and hearts are not as refined as they could be.

Stuart Briscoll wrote a book entitled *The Integrity Crisis*. The word integrity actually means wholeness. A person of integrity is someone who is the same in private as they are in public. A person of integrity does not say one thing, but really believe another. Hypocrisy is not in the life of a truly whole person. A person living an abundant life, a holy life, is a person of integrity; of wholeness.

God is holy, and therefore God is perfect in his integrity. James wrote of God this way, "Every generous gift of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." (James 1:17) God does not flip flop, nor is God sloppy, God is holy.

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Therefore, because we are God's children, we should also be holy. It is time to cease the sloppiness that exists in our lives, and embrace the abundant life Christ offers us. An abundant life purchased for us all at tremendous cost.