

Epiphany 5
February 5, 2012
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For the last year or so I've been participating in the Education for Ministry program here at St. Augustine's. The group gathers and studies the Bible and discusses it in depth, shares goings-on in their lives, prays and meditates on how God is working each participant's life. I've felt rather like the resident "butterfly" of the group, as I have had no ambitions to study for the deaconate, priesthood or any other formal part of the institutional church. I was somewhat surprised when Nigel asked me if I would be willing to preach on one of the Sundays in Epiphany. I said "yes", thinking that he meant Epiphany next year. However when I asked him for clarification I found out it was this year, two months from the asking. Surprise! I had already agreed so I couldn't, in good faith, refuse.

I looked at the Gospel passages and chose this particular Sunday. As I started looking over all of the scriptures for this day I was overcome with a sense of awe and thankfulness. The readings contain some of my all-time favorite scriptures and themes.

In the collect we are invited to leave our less than Godly ways so that we can claim the abundant life that God desires for us. Sin is mentioned and I wonder how we as Episcopalians think about this word. When I was younger I used to think that sin was for those denominations which seemed to dwell on it, perhaps Baptists. I thought that it meant doing bad things. The Catechism in our BCP on pg. 848 says: Sin is the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship with God, with other people, and with all creation. That seems pretty succinct. I guess it's not just for those other denominations.

In the passage from Isaiah we have God overseeing the vastness of creation. He's the one, "who stretches out the heavens like a curtain", and who, "brings out their hosts and numbers them calling them all by name". We are invited to look up and see what God has done, not to feel infinitesimally small (which we are), but to rejoice that God cares for all creation including us! We are reminded of Genesis, where God made the heavens and the earth and all that is in it and "saw that it was good".

Again in the psalm for today God "counts the number of the stars and calls them all by their names". Another theme brought out in the psalm is healing: "He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds". God is there in our lives and in our pain and desires us to be whole. No matter what our situation, God is with us desiring the best for us. The psalm invites us to be thankful, "Sing to the Lord with Thanksgiving; make music to our God upon the harp".

In the Gospel reading we have another scene from Jesus' life and work. He has just finished preaching in the synagogue at Capernaum, where we are told they were astounded at his teaching, as one with authority. He also was healing the afflicted. In this week's verses he then comes to Simon Peter's house and they immediately tell him about Peter's mother-in-law who is sick with a fever. He takes her hand and she is healed and gets up and "serves" them. This is a picture of Jesus acting out the attributes of God as healer and bringer of abundant life.

How should these verses affect us as we read/hear them? What does it mean to "serve"? As a woman I can look at this passage and think, "Oh sure! Back to the kitchen with you". But we can serve in so many ways; one of which might be in the kitchen or it might not. I love to cook and play with food, so this might be an option for me. It's not about somebody telling me where and how to serve, but it's about my understanding the gifts I've been given and using them. How can I show God's love and healing in our broken world?

We are created individually with unique gifts to share with the community here and with the world. God wants us to be the best of who we are. In the distant past I belonged to a Gospel group. We were all Episcopalians, who God had

touched in various ways in our lives. I grew up in the church and was fortunate to always sense the presence of God in my life. Others in the group had what could only be called a dramatic “Road to Damascus”, experience. They were living lives in opposition to God or at least being pretty wild & crazy. Jesus stepped in, stopped them in their tracks, made his presence known and gave them New Life.

I felt that since I didn’t have a dramatic story of how I met God, I didn’t have anything to share. It took me a very long time to realize that God wanted me to use the gifts I had been given. If I understand that God is with me in all of my life, from cooking, cleaning, singing, sewing, working; that is an incredible story. God is real! God is in my life!

As the song says, “How can I keep from singing?” When we walk with God in thankfulness, people will be drawn to us – to the life inside us. Our energy and perspective are of God rather than of the world, and resonate with his love. When we live in the light and life of Christ, our being and countenance are positively affected.

For example, this week I was talking with one of the nurses at work. She is terrified of losing her job and is feeling so anxious. Right now we are all in that same position. She asked me how I felt and I was able to share that I don’t put all my hope in my job, but that I have strength from God through prayer and meditation. We talked for a while and she said, “You have such peace in your eyes.”

Even in the worst of times God is with us. At one point, my life as I knew it was coming undone. My marriage was ending even though I KNEW that God had brought us together. My children were falling apart in various ways. We lost our house, due to an unscrupulous business partner and our own ignorance. Then I lost my job at the fabric store, which had given me such pleasure and a great creative outlet. I could not believe it! What was God thinking?

Here is how I saw God working.

I got a new job at the Health Department and came to realize that this was the new direction that God had for me. It was time for me to grow a little more. We were dealing with the AIDS crisis and I had the opportunity to meet some of the most wonderful people, who were living under a death sentence. I didn’t know that much about gay people at the time and had the usual unexamined prejudices. I met people, whose faith was much deeper than mine; who had been rejected by their families; their faith communities and most of the rest of society. Some of them were afraid to come in the door or leave their name for our AIDS coordinator to call them back. I was humbled and came to realize that the only thing I had to give them was understanding and love.

At this time Fr. Bill put my name up for inclusion in the new Diocesan HIV/AIDS committee, which I served on until it was incorporated into a larger group. I am not a committee person and had successfully avoided them for 42 years. I found that I was able to use my perspective and skills to help create a Diocesan wide handbook of services for people living with HIV/AIDS. I was able to use my creative sewing skills to make several banners for the group. This led indirectly to my business creating vestments and paraments. I also had the privilege to facilitate the Whidbey Island AIDS quilt. The quilt was a way for those dealing with the loss of someone they loved to express their love and grief. It also stands as a silent witness to those who have died.

More recently I have been privileged to work in the WIC program, meeting with pregnant women mothers & fathers of young children and those children themselves. Seeing these young families struggle to keep going, to remain in their homes, and have enough food for their families, has changed my perspective again. I feel so fortunate to be able to help in just a small way with some of what might be referred to as “the least of these”. They are often invisible to the larger society and have much to teach us about love and compassion.

There is another part to the Gospel today, equally important to us as we explore how we are to serve. After Jesus acts by healing and preaching, he goes by himself to a deserted place and prays. He goes to “renew his strength”, to get in uninterrupted contact with the One who gives us our strength and joy. Sometimes we can get so busy “doing” that we

forget to access the source of our strength. I know that in each part of life, if we take time to slow down and listen, God's invitation will become clear. It will probably involve those things at which we have talent; our gifts.

Finally, I want to say how very thankful I am to have been placed in this community with all of you. I knew from the very first Sunday I worshiped here that I had come home. I didn't think that was possible, as I was very happy where I had been living in Seattle. Initially I felt like I had been "kicked out of the Garden". Now I'm in a New Garden

And so as we go forward let us remember the awesome wonder of God's creation and how good it is; look to Jesus for healing and wholeness; be thankful for our lives and the gifts God has given us, and then look for those opportunities God has provided for us to serve. We do have life and we have it abundantly! Let us celebrate with joy the gifts we have been given.