

God's Initiative, Our Response

Second Sunday of Epiphany

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VA

Almighty God, whose Son our Savior Jesus Christ is the light of the world: Grant that your people, illumined by your Word and Sacraments, may shine with the radiance of Christ's glory, that he may be known, worshipped, and obeyed to the ends of the earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, now and for ever. AMEN.

Isaiah 62:1-5 (NRSV)

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch.² The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give.³ You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.⁴ You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married.⁵ For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

1 Corinthians 12:1-11 (NRSV)

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed.² You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak.³ Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says "Let Jesus be cursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit.⁴ Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit;⁵ and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord;⁶ and there

are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷ To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸ To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

John 2:1-11 (NRSV)

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. ² Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. ³ When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." ⁴ And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." ⁵ His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." ⁶ Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. ⁷ Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. ⁸ He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. ⁹ When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom ¹⁰ and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." ¹¹ Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

I'm going to use two elements from our Prayer Book liturgy today for my sermon: the collect and the postcommunion prayer. First, the collect. Let's pray it together: "Almighty God, whose Son our Savior Jesus Christ is the light of the world: Grant that your people, illumined by your Word and Sacraments, may shine with the radiance of Christ's glory, that he may be known, worshipped, and obeyed to the ends of the earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, now and for ever. Amen." I think we sometimes hear these collects—and the words of the liturgy—as so much religious language so we miss the deep spiritual reality they contain. This one is no exception.

Today's collect begins by acknowledging that Jesus is **"the light of the world."** Jesus refers to himself this way in the 8th chapter of John's gospel, where he says, **"I am the light of the world."** (John 8:12 NRSV) What does he mean here? In the Book of Genesis, the first thing God creates is light. He separates the light from the darkness and calls the light **"Day"** and the darkness **"Night."** If you're like me, you take the daylight for granted. Every morning, there it is. But without the light, our world would be a cold, lifeless rock floating in space. Jesus means that to have God's life in us we have to depend on him for life, just as the earth depends on the light from the sun to support life.

Our collect then asks God for something: **Grant that your people, illumined by your Word and Sacraments, may shine with the radiance of Christ's glory."** When we ask God to grant something, it means that we don't have it. It means that he's the only one who can give it. God is the only one that can **"illumine"** us—that is, turn on Jesus' light in us.

In other words, our collect tells us that shining Jesus' light into the world isn't up to us. It's up to God and God alone as he works in our lives and through our persons and actions.

Is this true? Don't we have a part in it? Yes—and no. Our lessons for today can help us understand this. In our reading from Isaiah, God is addressing his people through the prophet. He calls his people **"Zion"** and **"Jerusalem."** (Zion is the part of the city where King David set up his capital when he first conquered Jerusalem.) In the first sentence the Lord says, **"For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch."** God is saying he's absolutely committed to two things. First, that his people be vindicated—that they become a recognized political entity among the other nations of the world, instead of a failed state under constant foreign oppression. And second—and more important—that they will shine out his glorious salvation into this darkened world like a blazing torch.

God's going to do it—not the people. He goes on to cancel the derogatory names he had given them because they were rebellious and disobedient to him, and then he says he will marry them—the most intimate blessing a man could bestow on a woman in the ancient world.

Before I became a Christian, I found the Bible very disappointing. When I began to seek God in the Scriptures, I had expected to find helpful guidelines and rules for living the Christian life, but instead I found all this language about God's relationship with humans, like this passage.

And the relationship between God and his people is always initiated by God. Just as an example, you may recall the story of Zacchaeus, the tax collector in Luke 19. He was despised by his neighbors because he was ripping them off, as all the tax collectors who worked for the Romans did. As Jesus was passing through Jericho, where Zacchaeus lived, Zacchaeus climbed a tree in order to see him because he was considerably shorter than the people crowding around Jesus. Remember what happened? Jesus stopped in the middle of the street, looked up in the tree, called Zacchaeus by name, and invited himself to Zacchaeus' house for a meal. The bystanders disapproved because they hated the man—and let Jesus hear about it. But Jesus said, **“Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”**(Luke 19:9-10 NRSV) Jesus took the initiative. He sought out Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus wasn't doing anything different from the hundreds of other people who were crowding around Jesus. They all wanted to see Jesus. But it was Jesus who initiated his relationship with Zacchaeus.

Or take our reading from 1 Corinthians 12. In this famous passage Paul points out that God gives people spiritual gifts for the good of the Christian community: **“to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”** Christians don't gin up the Holy Spirit on their own. They don't make a list of what Paul calls the **“manifestations of the Spirit”** and then determine which ones they're going to exercise. No. They are *gifts*. We have to receive them. Our reading ends with verse 11: **“All these are activated by one and the same Spirit who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.”** Hear that? **“the Spirit chooses.”** Not us. We're not in charge. God initiates it.

Our gospel reading eloquently tells us that it's God's own initiative that puts us into relationship with him, rather than human religious practice. Jesus turns the water into wine. But notice where the water is stored: in **“six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification.”** These would have been on hand so the caterers could wash the tables and utensils, and the wedding guests wash their hands. This was Jewish religious custom, backed by the Law of Moses. But Jesus changes the water of purification into the fine wine of the wedding. He's showing that he was superseding the ceremonial religious system with the grace of God—in

his own person. This is how here, in the beginning of Jesus' ministry, God establishes his purpose in sending him. It has its desired effect. John tells us, **"Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him."**

The collect specifies two ways Jesus is to light us up with his life: his **"Word and Sacraments."** God's word is the Bible. It's not words *about* God. It's God's communication of his character and his purposes to us. It's his *revelation* of himself. Another collect (for Proper 28) gives us this spiritual truth: God **"caused all holy Scripture to be written for our learning."** Of course there were human authors. Of course the books of the Bible reflect ancient cultural realities—like the importance of a wedding in village culture. But it was God who caused them to be written—for our learning. The collect goes on to ask God to **"Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ."** Notice that this collect doesn't ask the Lord to **"grant us to hear them once a week in church or Sunday school so that throughout the week we can entertain a vague notion that we are associated with the Christian religion."** No. They are to be our daily study and meditation.

In addition to God's word, our collect for today says God turns on Jesus' light in us through the sacraments—through baptism and Holy Communion. Baptism signifies God's action in calling us to himself and giving us faith in his Son Jesus Christ. The Bible says, **"when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead."** (Colossians 2:12 NRSV) By faith and baptism, God takes the initiative in including us in Christ's death and his resurrection. Without faith in Christ, baptism is just water, like that in the stone jars.

And in Holy Communion, Scripture tells us, **"as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."**(1 Corinthians 11:26 NRSV) Jesus' death for our sins and his resurrection from the dead are the center of our faith. They are what God has accomplished. It's not a human achievement, but a divine donation for our welfare and the glory of God.

When I asked earlier if it were true that God's action in our lives is strictly God's initiative and not our own, I answered "yes"—and "no." We do have a part. That part is responding to what God has already done. This is the classic dilemma of whether we live by faith or by works. The passage of Scripture that best

explains this is Ephesians 2:8-10: **“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”**

Our salvation comes from our faith—our trust that Jesus died for my sins and your sins and that he rose from the dead for my eternal life and your eternal life. But faith is **“the gift of God.”** We don’t invent it or generate it. But the purpose for which God grants us this great salvation is to do good works. Just as we are his workmanship, our part is to do the works he has given us to do. And God prepared those works for us to do.

So what are those works? In our postcommunion prayer we ask the Lord to **“send us out to do the work you have given us to do, to love and serve you as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord.”** Witnesses testify to what they have seen and experienced. If you have experienced God’s loving grace in drawing you to faith in Jesus, God wants you to tell someone!

All this is from God—it’s not our invention or creation. That’s why we have to keep close to Jesus in his Word and Sacraments in order to do the works he has prepared for us. Keeping close to Jesus, we’ll be sure we’ll be doing works that please him and bring to reality the day when he will **“be known, worshipped, and obeyed to the ends of the earth.”** This is how we shine his light into this dark world. Let us pray.