

You may know the wonderful joke about the man who tries to improve his image in town by buying some new clothes. But he’s stingy, so he decides to purchase a deeply discounted suit. The sales clerk explains that although the left sleeve of the suit is longer than the right, the right pants leg is shorter than the left, and the jacket is slightly crooked, the man can compensate by holding his left elbow bent, walking without bending his right leg, and leaning slightly to one side. Consequently, he becomes known around town as that poor, crippled man who wears the best looking clothes!

But God wants to free us from the crippling broken-ness of this world, so that we can not only appear alive but truly **be** alive. The Collect for today is a prayer for “the liberty of that abundant life made known to us in Jesus Christ.” This is the same declaration of “abundant life” Jesus tells us about in John Chapter 10:when he says, “I came that you might have life and have it abundantly.” (See Jn. 10:10) This is not the half-life of limping through this world in crippled fashion. No, God wants us to be a people truly leaping for the joy of our freedom. Ah, but there is some effort on our own part here if we are to have this abundant life. In order to achieve this full blessing in the freedom of the Resurrection, in John 10 Jesus also advises us that his way is the one true door by which his sheep may enter into the safety of the fold (See Jn.10:7) And that’s the only real way into the blessings of this abundant life.

This echoes what Our Lord says in Matthew 7 and Luke 13 when he warns us that the gate that leads to this abundant life is not so wide as to be of our own making. No. We must travel by a very specific pathway if we would have this blessing of abundant life. It involves a lot more than just going through the motions. I assume most of us can recite The Lord’s Prayer by heart. But how much of it do we really commit to when we say it on Sunday mornings? Do we profess it as a promise to truly forgive as we would be forgiven? Or are these words the rote and empty recitation of a wandering mind that’s really just thinking about what’s for Sunday lunch?

That’s kind of what Isaiah is talking about here. He’s telling us that it’s no good going through life in a state of denial, pretending that we don’t need correction. Isaiah’s telling the people of Judah in the 8th Century BC – and by extension he’s telling us – that God is offended by religious ritual, however impressive it might be, if this ritual conceals an empty heart and a careless life.¹ The prophet asks us this morning how we can hope to receive the loving attention of God if we ourselves persist in ignoring the pleas of those who need our help? “On the day of your fasting you do as you please and exploit [others]...you cannot [act] as you do and expect your voice to be heard on high.” (See Is.58:3b,4a) This is actually the same warning that Jesus’ younger half-brother James tells the early Christian Church. At the beginning of Chapter 4 of his letter, James writes “You desire and do not have, so you murder (or slander). You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.” (Jas. 4:1-3) Both Isaiah and James are talking about **real** change, **real** transformation, the **real** repentance that’s required in all of us if we’re truly going to get right with God. Because God requires not just the trappings of faithfulness; God requires the genuine transformation of a truly faithful heart, born out in the redemption of a changed life. So once saved by grace through faith in Christ, we Christians are to lead holy lives. Why?



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¹ See Introduction to Isaiah in ESV Study Bible, p. 1236, “Key Theme 1”

I mean, I'm saved. I assume most of the people in this Church today can profess that they have accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior, and have been redeemed by grace through faith in him and by the precious blood of His Cross. So, isn't that it? I mean I've already got my fire insurance, my green card to the Kingdom, my get-out-of-jail-free pass. So, what's all this requirement to live a holy life? What's the point?

Well, good people, the point in living this holy life in God is so that we "can rejoice, rejoice, again I say rejoice." (Phil.4:4) How is God going to be glorified unless God's people can show to the rest of the world the delirious delight there is in being a redeemed Child of God? That's what it really means to lead a full, abundant, joyous and holy life. To be a people who celebrates.

Oh, but please note that this abundant life is not free from strife. Today's psalm says that very clearly. Ps.112:4 tells us that, Yes, "Light shines in the darkness for the upright" but there's still darkness. In verse 6 we find that, yes, it's true, "They [the righteous, the redeemed] will never be shaken" but you can bet that their world will be shaken from time to time. The next verse of the Psalm says "They [the righteous, the redeemed] will not be afraid of any evil rumors."

But as long as men have tongues, I can promise you these rumors, and some pretty ugly rumors about you will be told. If you don't believe it, just ask any clergyperson who's spent even a few months in the ministry.

And seeking this abundant life makes no worldly sense! It's not great wealth, or prestige, or power that God promises us when he offers us life in abundance. Because this kind of life doesn't make sense in terms of the perspectives and priorities of this world.

The way the Gospel is witnessed often makes little worldly sense. Paul points out this in the Epistle today to the church in Corinth. He notes how he did not seek to win them over with clever reason and inspiring oratory. In fact, he reminds them how he came to the new believers in Corinth not with "lofty words of wisdom," but instead in an attitude of "weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling" (see 1Cor.2:1,3). He tells us how his words and speech were not all that plausible in human terms (see v. 4). Yes, Paul's speaking was certainly not convincing from a worldly point of view. But God used Paul's halting speech and trembling manor for God's glory. And not by worldly means, but by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Corinthians were won over to The Lord. No, it doesn't make any worldly sense. But then God has never been particularly interested in making sense according to the terms of this world.

I can't tell you how often I've heard people say, "Well, I don't talk about my faith very much because it's not something I feel comfortable talking about. I wouldn't know what to say." The truth is, God knows exactly what you need to say. He's tells us clearly in his word, "Do not worry about....what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say." (See Lk.12:11-12) Be assured that if God has called you to witness to someone, you shouldn't be concerned about your choice of words. That's not your problem. But for Heaven's sake, speak!

Yes, this transformation from a purely worldly existence to the life of the believer is contradictory to the world; it makes no worldly sense. So, what does all this living a holy life mean for you and me? Well, you see, sometimes it's incredibly hard to turn the other cheek. The supposed justice of this world requires the reparations of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth; just ask any lawyer. But God's people don't respond to others in their own hurtful way, Rather the child of God responds with the love and mercy the world often refuses to grant you.

We, by the grace of God and through the power of the Holy Spirit are to produce a life so joyous, so forgiving, so inclusive that men do indeed take notice. We are to become the light of the world, a city on a hill. You see, we are supposed to be the joyous, celebratory people of God so that the rest of the world will understand and come to know the immense fulfillment of what it means to be a citizen of God's Kingdom. We are to celebrate life so that God may be glorified, and others may be added to those names in the Book of Life.

At the end of the Gospel account, Jesus clearly expresses this need to receive the full blessing of God through faithfulness to His commandments as a reason for his coming into the world. “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.” (Mt.5:17) In a way, with the incarnation of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit, God’s people are finally able to fulfill the call to have this abundant life and to be God’s holy people. In John Chapter 14, Jesus says, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” (Jn.14:15) But, it’s not a warning, it’s a promise. “Be assured my children; if you love me, you will keep my commandments.” Those who find the abundant life in Christ also find great joy in being faithful to the Father’s will. Not out of a sense of fearful obedience, born of a dread what will happen if we somehow miss the mark. No, for “there is now no more condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus.” (Rom. 8:1) Instead, you and I live with the constant joy of fulfilling the destiny to which Our Lord has called us, simply because He has already loved us so very much. It’s all about grace you see. God’s grace once received births love. And we are a people whose undying joy it is to serve the Lord of Limitless Love.

So, come, let us be with Jesus, a city on a hill, the light of the world, a light which the darkness will never overcome (see Jn.1:5).

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen. JWB+ 01-31-17