

Yr. C, Epiphany 5
February 4, 2007
Preached by Furman Buchanan
St. Martins in the Fields
1832 words

Lessons:
Psalm 85
Judges 6:11-24
1 Corinthians 15:1-11
Luke 5:1-11

They said, “We have worked very hard, with nothing to show for it!”

“Glory to God, whose power—working in us—can do more than we can ask or imagine.”¹

It is the season of Epiphany, and there is just one presentation after another. On the first Sunday after the Epiphany Jesus was presented at his baptism with the gift of the Holy Spirit and the blessing of the Father. Ten days later Sy Friedman was presented by Bob King and Gordon Dixon to receive the Sacrament of Baptism over at Baptist Hospital. Three days after that I was presented by my priest and my family to Bishop Henderson in order to be ordained a priest. This week the Broussard’s—who came to us from New Orleans—were presented with a new baby girl. And this past Friday was the Feast of the Presentation of our Lord in the Temple by his parents.

Epiphany means manifestation, and manifestation is all about presentation. During this season of Epiphany, we have received glimpses of Christ’s presentation right here in our very midst.

But, then we listen to Simon in this morning’s Gospel as he complains, “Master, we have worked all night long, and haven’t caught a thing.” Or, to translate it another way, “We have worked very hard, and we have nothing to show for it.”

What do *we* do when we have given our absolute best effort and we have nothing to show for it, when we seemingly have nothing to present for our labor or our time?

It happens regularly in our daily lives. We bend over backwards to do something nice for someone else and it goes unnoticed. We save up to do something nice for ourselves, and it doesn’t pan out. We apply for a job, knowing that we could do the work as well as anyone, and yet someone else gets the position. Or we try to be a friend to someone at school, and our best efforts get rebuffed.

¹ Ephesians 3:20, offered as a concluding sentence for Morning Prayer, Book of Common Prayer, p. 102

It happens in monumental ways too. We work hard our whole lives to build a retirement and then our savings fall short. We put our heart and soul into our marriage, and it fails anyway. Or things seem to be going pretty well all the way around and then we lose our health or someone we love.

What do we do when we have worked all night long, but have not caught what we wanted—or even needed? Where's the presentation, then? Like Simon Peter, we have worked so very hard, and we have nothing to show for it.

I'll tell you what we do oftentimes. We take those disappointments, those wounds, and we bandage them as best we can—and as *quickly* as we can.

It is natural to respond to a crisis in one's life by applying a tourniquet as fast as you can. Just stop the bleeding, for goodness sake! We know deep down in our bones that we can't lose too much blood—physically or emotionally. Our lives are fragile, and our psyches are fragile. Bandage it quickly! Apply pressure! Stop the bleeding!

We do the same thing corporately. We see it in the government, and we even do it in the Church. We work hard and try to do our best, and when things fall apart and we have nothing to show for it, we try to bandage it as quickly as possible. When we discover these gaping holes in our lives or our institutions we try to fill them up—and the faster, the better!

This leads to an even bigger spiritual problem for us individually and corporately in 21st century American culture. You see, our problem is not the same as Simon Peter's. Our problem is different. In fact, our problem is worse.

Our problem is not that we have worked very hard and have *nothing* to show for it. Our problem is that we have worked very hard, and we have *too much* to show for it.

We are like Simon Peter because in reality we know the nets are empty. We know there is a hole. We know there are emotional wounds. But through our power (which is expressed most clearly by our wealth and our calendars), we try to fill these holes ourselves.

We bandage our wounds with nice houses. Think about it—advertisements for stores like Lowe’s and Home Depot are telling us explicitly that we can create “sanctuaries” in our own private homes! Don’t hear this wrong. I shop at those stores, too. But we need to be aware of the difference between *furnishings* and *bandages*, between a *restful shelter* and an *exclusive, private hospital*.

We also fill our incompleteness with busy, over-booked schedules that distract us from our wounds and our emptiness. We do this as adults, and we even promote this with our children and teenagers. We fill our holes with entertainment. Sports, movies, television—all good things in and of themselves—but when I walk down a hospital hall and room after room is filled with the blaring dribble of whatever happens to be on T.V., I am convinced it is a source of distraction rather than a source of healing.

I spent two summers as a chaplain in a Florida hospital, and I was overwhelmed by the television addiction of patients and their families. I told my supervisor that those of us who were chaplains didn’t need Bibles. We needed scissors in order to cut every last power cord to every last T.V. in the building. Don’t hear me wrong. I watch sports, movies and television, too. But be aware of the difference between *entertainment* and *distraction*, between *enrichment* and *anesthesia*.

Our problem is worse than Simon Peters’. Our nets are not only empty of that which can truly feed us; they are filled with all sorts of cultural substitutes and imitations that conceal the true degree of emptiness. In other words, we have worked very hard and have nothing to show for it, but we are too absorbed and distracted in our sanctuaries, in our busyness, and in our noise to even realize this is true.

In spite of it all, every now and then we catch epiphanies of God’s gracious presentation to us—in baptism, in the birth of a new child, in the Holy Eucharist, and in a catch of fish so abundant that it nearly sinks the boat.

I believe part of the message we need to receive from Luke’s Gospel lesson is this: Having something to show for it is not our vocation. Having something to show for it is *God’s* vocation.

Our vocation is infinitely more simple and yet incredibly challenging. Our vocation is to trust God. Not just *believe* in God, but *trust* God. And that means not rushing in to try to fill our own emptiness or bandage our own wounds all by ourselves.

I am not going to tell you that Christ will fill every empty space or eliminate every wound or soothe every suffering. After all, the resurrected Christ still bore the scars of crucifixion. He did not fill those empty holes in his hands and feet, St. Thomas did that when he opened himself to a radical new trust in his Lord.

You see, the Gospel promise is not that pain and emptiness are eliminated, but that they are transformed. Christ transforms our long, dark night of futility casting our nets in search of something that will nourish us, if only we have the courage to trust.

About five years ago, our two oldest children joined the Jewish Community Center Swim Team. It was not about competition as much as it was about learning how to swim. One afternoon there was a swim meet at Rockbridge Club. If my memory is correct, the pool is shaped like the letter “L.” The relatively shallow swim lanes run in one direction, but at the far end some of the lanes get very deep.

Finley, who was 5 and still a *very* tentative novice, somehow ended up in the lane closest to the deep end. At the sound of the cap gun, the race began and Finley made a couple of strokes and then clung to the side wall. Her coach knelt down on the side wall and urged her to keep going. She took another couple of strokes and reached again to the left for the safety of the side wall. Once again, her coach pressed her to keep trying. Barely convinced, Finley set out again for a couple of strokes before grasping for that sure and certain concrete wall.

This pattern repeated several times until the point at which the side wall terminated in a 90 degree angle into the diving end of the pool. The race had already been won, and all eyes watched to see whether this nervous, new swimmer would venture across the deep end alone with no side wall to grasp and no coach nearby to reassure, or whether she would climb out and try again later in the season.

I stood at the end of her lane on the far side of the deep end, and I didn't know whether to cheer her on or make my way around the deep end to help her out of the pool.

And then—with a lunge forward—she set out into the deep and toward me on the far wall. She was *not* particularly graceful, and yet the moment was *overflowing* with grace.

Fifty to seventy-five parents and kids remained stunningly quiet for several moments as most of us watched with disbelief, and then the crowd (the congregation, you might say) began to cheer her across the deep until she eventually reached out to grab the wall and finish the race!

Risk and trust do not come easy for many of us. God knows we want to be in control. And yet, here we are—just like Simon Peter—listening to Christ call us out into deeper water.

Our experience tells us that it is a waste of time or that it is just too dangerous out there. And our experience is valid. That is why, just like at the swim meet, most of us (especially those of us who are adults) look on in disbelief.

But faithfulness is not built upon our experience, our belief, our abilities, or even our hard work. Faithfulness is built upon trust, just like the trust of a child.

In this season of Epiphany, we are called to present ourselves to God—our souls and bodies, even our empty nets. And we ask Christ to transform them with *his* abundance. We pray to the Lord, who is our light and our salvation, and we ask for courage to launch out into the deep with child-like trust and receive the blessing of his overflowing grace and mercy.

“Glory to God, whose power—working in us—can do more than we can ask or imagine.”²

Amen.

² Ephesians 3:20, offered as a concluding sentence for Morning Prayer, Book of Common Prayer, p. 102