

Holy God, send Your Word, send Your Spirit, send Your love. Amen.

In our new “Recharge” Bible Study, we are studying the book of Acts – the most exciting book in the bible. We get a glimpse why in this week’s reading. Only months after the resurrection, there are already Christian communities forming and saints emerging – people like Tabitha who excel at caring for others. Then Tabitha gets sick and dies. And the business of mourning kicks in – her body is washed and prepared, and the mourners get right to their duties.

But at least one person in Joppa was not prepared to accept death as the end of Tabitha’s story. At least one person thought,
“Hey, Jesus just rose from the dead. Doesn’t that mean something for all of us?”
That someone heard that the apostle Peter was in a nearby town, and sent for him. Why Peter? He was known as one who had walked closely with Jesus, and he had demonstrated a powerful ministry since Pentecost. In fact, in the story just before this one, he had healed a man who’d been paralyzed and bed-ridden for eight years. No doubt word had spread quickly. So Peter was summoned. And he came.

He was greeted by the widows, who proudly showed him Tabitha’s fine handiwork. But Peter wasn’t there to see textiles and tapestries. He was there to bring life. Maybe he remembered that little girl whom Jesus had restored to life after she’d died. Jesus had put everyone out of the room, except for Peter, James and John. Peter had watched Jesus bring the power of the Holy Spirit to bear on someone who had died - and he saw the Spirit restore that girl’s life. That’s what the Holy Spirit does. Restores life.

That’s what Peter did now. Did he know in advance that God would do this?
Maybe. We’re told he knelt and prayed. Was he asking, “Should I?”
That’s always wise thing when we pray for healing. Was he praying, “Strengthen me?”
Or was he simply praying the only prayer we need, “Come, Holy Spirit, fill me.”
It is the Holy Spirit who heals, not us. We are the channels through which the Spirit works in this world. Peter allowed himself to channel Life into Tabitha.

Did he overturn the laws of nature? Sure. It’s what Jesus did. There was a doctor in a previous congregation, who was disturbed by my talking and preaching about healing. “What’s next?” he said, “Are we going to raise the dead?” “I hope so!” I replied. There are communities where that is a response to death that seems premature, and sometimes they see people revived, more where it’s expected.

Jesus said that those who followed him would have life eternally – that isn't meant only to start after we die. It starts here, it starts now, as we are baptized into the life of Jesus Christ and he takes up residence in us. Tabitha was going to have life either way – either continuing her earthly life in an earthly body with its aches and pains and gradual decay, or release into eternal life in that land where there is no death. It was win/win for her. She came back into this life as Peter prayed. Doesn't always happen but why not ask?

How did those who were mourning feel having their wailing interrupted by life? When I read about these mourners, I can't help but think of the church. God calls us, Jesus' church, to be his Life in this world. Yet too often we're like those mourners, showing off our tapestries and vestments, too quick to accept death as the final word, too quick to say, "Oh well. Too bad." Like Peter, we are to be in the business of life, not perpetuating a quiet death of half-living with tempered expectations. Like Peter, we are called to inject supernatural power into natural proceedings. We are called to bring the Holy Spirit into any room we are in.

This is our calling as Christ's church, to proclaim life, to bring life, to interrupt death, to interrupt premature mourning; to proclaim the One who said he will wipe every tear from our eyes. We are especially called to bring life into situations others think are hopeless. It is hard to describe the impact we have had on 26 young people through our "Prom4All" initiative, giving prom clothes and gear to students without the resources to get them. This week we got several requests to pay for prom tickets and to rent tuxes for a few young gentlemen, one of whom has no family at all and often sleeps in his car. While he's trying to finish high school.

On Friday, Barbara Palko went up to one of our high schools while a representative from Men's Warehouse was there, to pay for two tux rentals. While waiting for a receipt in the office, an administrator, Ms. Carter, asked if she might pay for a third ticket, for a young man named Sean. As she wrote out another check, she saw a young man emerge from a back office with a teacher. His head was down, and she heard him say, "Nobody cares about me." At that very moment, Ms. Carter said to her, "Oh, here's Sean. Would you like to meet him?" Sean was the young man she'd just overheard. He approached and shook her hand, his head still down. Ms. Carter said, "Sean, this is Mrs. Palko. She just paid for your prom ticket." His head came up, and a tear formed in the corner of his eye. Barbara said to him, "Sean, I want you to know that Christ Church in La Plata cares about you, and I care about you." She was teary, and Ms. Carter was teary, and the teacher with Sean was teary – and Sean was beaming. "Now, enjoy your prom, and be safe!" she added.

Not only that... when she went to pay for the rentals, the Men's Warehouse representative said she was only going to charge the church \$150 for each; she was personally going to pay the balance, because she was so moved by what we are doing. As are the school administrators we're working with. This initiative wasn't even our idea – we just wanted to find a way to reach out to homeless students in our school system, and were told this was an urgent need, It seems frivolous – but not to a 17 or 18-year-old, especially one living in poverty. God is in the business of transformation, and these kids felt transformed in these clothes, looking like their best possible selves. "I didn't know I could be beautiful," one said. Those kids will always have that image of themselves, how they looked dressed to the nines, alongside whatever other pictures life throws at them. And they will always know someone cared, some group of folks they don't know. That's what it means to bring life, my friends. That is our mission.

Today we celebrate Jesus as the Good Shepherd. He actually sounds like a pretty ticked off, fierce shepherd in this reading, which he was.

But we need a fierce shepherd, who always has our backs:

My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.

What a promise! Our future is life, here and in eternity. And he will never let us go.

As we center our lives on Jesus, we learn to hear his voice – and he will call us when we need him, or when someone needs us. See, we are his sheep, and we are his shepherds, assistant shepherds to help him tend the flocks beyond this place, all those sheep out there who are lost for lack of purpose, direction, love, health, home, family – or knowing that anyone on this earth cares about them.

I want you to think of a situation in which you feel defeated, global or personal; in which you feel the script has been written, the die cast, no life is possible, call in the mourners. What comes to mind?

Now, I want you to ask God to show you if there is any life you didn't detect.

How many of God's stories don't get the endings God wants because we shut them down? Who are we to say when a story is over?

If you get an inkling there is more God wants to write in that particular story, bring life into it. Your life, God's life, the power of the Holy Spirit unleashed in you.

We come here to be filled with the Spirit, and then carry the Spirit out of here.

God's story is still unfolding, and God is writing it through us, his saints,

his shepherds. God gives us that much power. God gives us that much Life.

Our Shepherd of Life has released his life into us. Go proclaim the Good News – the Life of God has interrupted death, now and forever.

As we will sing in a few minutes – God is good! All the time! *Amen.*

Acts 9:36-43

Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay." So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

Psalm 23

1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want.

2 He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters.

3 He revives my soul and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.

4 Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

5 You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; you have anointed my head with oil, and my cup is running over.

6 Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

John 10:22-30

At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one."