

Second Sunday in Epiphany  
Isaiah 49:1-7, Psalm 40:1-12, John 1:29-42  
David H. Teschner  
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St. Jerome lived in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries and is responsible for translating the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into Latin. Jerome's translation was called the Vulgate. When you go to the Holy Land and visit the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, you can see the little cell where Jerome did his work.

There is a story told that one day, toward the end of St. Jerome's life, he had a direct encounter with Jesus. The old saint and scholar gazed at Jesus for a moment and then asked, "Lord, what do you want from me?"

Jesus said nothing, and just looked lovingly upon his faithful servant. The silence disturbed Jerome greatly.

"Lord," Jerome insisted, "what do you want from me? My writings are all yours, my mind and my gift for languages are yours, my piety and prayer life – they are all yours."

"Jerome," Jesus said, "I have all these things already. I want what you have kept from me. Give me your sin."

John the Baptist sees Jesus coming and calls him "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." By the time John writes the fourth gospel, thought to be the last and latest, Jesus' death on the cross has been identified primarily as an act of sacrifice. Lambs were used in the Temple for sin offerings along with goats and bulls. The lamb was also the animal killed for the sacred Passover meal when Jews were reminded of their deliverance from slavery in Egypt centuries earlier. To further associate Jesus with the Passover lambs, John's gospel – unlike Matthew, Mark and Luke – places Jesus' death at the very hour that Passover lambs were being killed in the Temple in Jerusalem.

While the forgiveness of sins is still one of the meanings and benefits of Jesus' death, it is not the only one. It may be the most difficult one for modern people like us because we do not want to think too much about our sins. We want to have happy thoughts, and that is good as long as we don't whitewash over thoughts, habits, activities and words that harm us and others.

As the story about St. Jerome points out, Jesus' concern for our sins is only that we give them to him so they can't harm us and others any longer. Jesus is the Lamb of God to

take our sins and put them to death with him. He doesn't want to put us to death for our sins or for us to suffer as a result of our sins. How many people want the worst parts of us? Jesus does. So let's give them up freely and swiftly.

In the second half of our gospel this morning, we meet St. Andrew and St. Peter for the first time in John's gospel. Andrew is the lesser known brother compared to Peter, but responsible for bringing his brother Peter to Jesus.

My St. Andrew was a college friend named Joe. At the beginning of my senior year at the University of Rhode Island, Joe brought me to a little Episcopal church called St. Peter's-by-the Sea in Narragansett, not far from the University. I didn't know a thing about what I called the "Episcopalian" church and probably couldn't even pronounce the name at first. Joe invited me to come to an informal Friday night prayer and study group of very friendly people, mostly older than me, who were delighted that I had joined them. I couldn't have been more warmly received. Within a short while, I was attending both the 8:00 and 10:00 Sunday services as well as Friday evenings, singing in the choir and teaching Sunday school. Later that fall I was confirmed. This was in 1972.

I'll be forever grateful to Joe, a friend I still visit in Rhode Island, and that little group of Christians that welcomed me so warmly and sincerely and gave me a place to serve.

Did you have a St. Andrew like Joe in your life?

Can you remember the first time you visited a new church, maybe this church?

Did you receive the sort of welcome that convinced you that Jesus or the Spirit of God was here among the people?

Few of us will be remembered as great preachers, evangelists, missionaries or theologians, but we can all invite others to come and see what we have found and experienced at Christ and Grace. If it is important and life affirming for us, we should automatically want to share it and spread it around.

If I had to give someone in our church "the St. Andrew Award" for inviting friends and coworkers to Christ and Grace, the award would have to go to Bee Betts. Just last Sunday a friend of hers was at the 10:30 service for the first time, and she'll often bring co-workers in uniform to potluck suppers while their emergency vehicles idle in the parking lot in case they get a call.

You'll notice in the bulletin every Sunday that the Greeters are listed as "everyone." The least we can do is welcome the newcomer and do everything possible to make him or her feel completely accepted just as Christ has fully accepted any one of us. We are all

custodians of this place on behalf of Jesus, the head of the church. We all were newcomers once. Aren't we glad, those who were here wanted us to stay and come back?

Dr. Scott Peck tells a wonderful story called "The Rabbi's Gift." A monastery had fallen on hard times. Only five elderly monks remained including the abbot. In the deep woods around the monastery, there was a small hut where a local rabbi came occasionally for prayer and solitude. The abbot decided one day to go to the hut in the woods and seek advice from the rabbi. When he explained the problem of so few men in the order, the rabbi could only commiserate, for membership in his synagogue was declining as well. They talked, read the Bible together, prayed and finally embraced, so glad to have finally met one another.

The rabbi felt sorry that he had had no good advice to give the abbot as he began to leave, but he did say, "The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

When the abbot returned to the monastery, the monks were eager to hear what the rabbi had said. "He couldn't help us." said the abbot. "We just wept and read scripture. But when I left he said something cryptic which I didn't understand."

"What was that?" they wanted to know."

"He said, 'The Messiah is one of us.'"

The monks pondered these words over the next several months wondering which of them might be the messiah. Each quickly dismissed the notion that he himself was the messiah, but they could easily imagine that any of the others might be. A funny thing happened. They all started treating each other differently with greater respect, and a deep gladness ensued. The occasional visitors to the monastery noticed it, too, and soon more and more people came to enjoy the surrounding grounds and forest. The monks' cheerfulness was contagious, and gradually young men asked to join and become part of this special place. The monastery revived, thanks to the rabbi's gift.

Can't we say, like Andrew and the monks, that we, too, have found the Messiah and he is among us as well? AMEN.