

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Feb. 3-4, 2018

Our readings today move from despair to hope. In the first reading, Job has lost his children, his livelihood, his health. He feels hopeless. In the Gospel, “the whole town” came to Jesus, bringing with them all who were ill or possessed by demons. They wait patiently for him, filled with hope.

In between these readings we Paul’s testimony that he has found his whole purpose and meaning in life to be preaching to as many as possible the hope that he has found in Christ.

Which leads to the question of what is our purpose in life? Have we found it? This in turn leads me to share the story of some who did find their purpose in life and to some thoughts for us about our parish mission in March and its special focus on helping us discover the purpose in life for which each of us has been anointed by God.

In the first reading, Job is in the depths of despair. His days are miserable, his nights are troubled. He fears that his life will end before he is ever happy again. Yet, we should note that he addresses his sorrows to God. Somewhere inside of him there must have been some little glimmer of hope -- hope that God would hear him.

On the other hand, in today’s Gospel, we have “the whole town gathered at the door” of the house where Jesus is staying. Jesus ended up curing people all evening, healing illnesses and driving out demons. Hope was overflowing. He probably could have stayed there for weeks as word about him spread throughout the region. Already in his ministry we see people coming to him rather than him going out to them.

But is it his mission to stay there in Capernaum or not? In the morning Jesus

goes off to pray in a deserted place, and in his prayer the Father clarifies his mission. When the disciples find him and encourage him to stay in Capernaum, Jesus responds and tells them, “Let us go to the nearby villages that I may preach there also. For this purpose, I have come.” (Mark 1:38)

Jesus has a mission, a mission from God, and this mission and purpose is to keep going out to others and spreading the gospel.

This mission of Jesus to go out and preach to others, which he is totally faithful to, impacts others who encounter him. For example, Simon Peter’s mother-in-law, when cured of her fever, immediately gets up and begins to serve the guests in her house.

Another who dramatically takes the mission to preach the gospel to heart is St. Paul who also makes it his life’s calling. His encounter with the Lord changed him profoundly. Everything inside him moved him to bring that encounter to others.

He feels impelled to give his whole life and obedience over to the Lord – freely and willingly making himself a slave to the Lord -- all for the recompense and for the desire to share more deeply in the graces of the Gospel himself. Paul presents himself in his letter to the Corinthians as a evangelist who works for the benefit of everyone without distinction.

In Paul we see a person who has truly found his meaning and purpose and joy for his time of life on earth. Just as Jesus has his purpose and mission in life, so all of us in one way or another are called to share in Jesus’ mission of preaching the Gospel and spreading the reign of God. As Jesus teaches us to pray in the Lord’s Prayer – “thy kingdom come, thy will be done.” Paul finds his purpose and joy in life to be an evangelist. We all find it in different calls in life.

For example, bringing new life into the world is one of the most satisfying things a person can do. A young man with a high position at Harvard College recently showed someone visiting the school an iPhone baby picture and confessed – I am passionate about my work, but what I am really passionate about is this tiny little girl of mine.”

Parents know what he’s talking about. But so do farmers, teachers, workers, persons in healing and helping professions of every kind. When we bring life in any way into the world with music, words, understanding, a new idea, or helping hand we experience the thrill of deep communion with God. – We find ourselves thinking -- *for this purpose I am here.*

Jesus said that his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well was better than food. Jesus truly was his Father’s son as he preached and taught, healed and consoled people. We too are most fully and joyfully the children of God when we fulfill our true purpose as bearers of Christ’s life and light into a world that has so much darkness and death at its heart.

What about others that have found their meaning and purpose in life? It so happens that this weekend marks the anniversary of the sinking of the troop transport ship Dorchester on Feb. 3, 1943 near Greenland and on its way to Europe and the story of the Four Chaplains and their death together along with about 700 other men.

I had heard a little about it, and perhaps you have heard the story. If not, I encourage you to check it out. Anyway, Val Bernat gave a me a copy of their story written by a retired military officer and the story illustrates how if we are in tune with God he will show us and lead us to our special purpose in life.

The story of the four chaplains is about a Jewish rabbi, a Dutch Reformed pastor, a Methodist pastor and a Catholic priest.

All of them share a common story of being quite powerfully called into ministry in their respective denominations and also a common story that all of them were powerfully called to volunteer as chaplains following the bombing of Pearl Harbor that they might serve the needs of the soldiers serving in WW II.

The writer of their story says that “Each was tested at a young age and came to the realization that his would be a life of service to God and man.” Initially serving on various military bases in the US, they all wound up being assigned to a military camp in Massachusetts and then to travel and serve on the troop ship Dorchester.

It seems that the four chaplains had a great love and respect for each other and were always together and supporting each other’s ministry. As much as possible they tried to encourage the troops as they traveled with others ships in a convoy through a dangerous area where there were German submarines, each of them making the rounds that night trying to lift the spirits of the men.

However, it did happen that their ship was torpedoed, experienced an explosion and sank that night in about 18 minutes. In the midst of all the chaos and panic and fear, survivors speak of witnesses these chaplains calmly speaking to the panicking men, helping them get off the ship, giving up their own life preservers and finally standing arms linked together in prayer as the ship went fully under water. These chaplains were awarded many posthumous medals and honors for sacrifices of themselves they had made for God and the soldiers they served. These four

chaplains had found their joy and purpose in the service of God and others.

What about ourselves? Have we found our purpose and joy in life?

Mary Sharon Moore, who will be leading our parish mission in March, writes these words in her book, “Anointed for Purpose” which is the title for our mission:

“When your life’s work is grounded in God desiring coming to life within you, you will become like the person who finds a treasure hidden in a field, and who quickly goes and sells everything in order to buy that field. – When your work life is grounded in God’s perfect plan, you will be on fire with the Holy Spirit, even if quietly or in hidden ways, willing to sell all you have for the treasure of serving the reign of God. And you will ignite your world with holy possibility, as only the Holy Spirit of the living Christ can do.”

When I read the words of St. Paul in the second reading I thought of how these words describe what Paul is trying telling us about himself today, and about how they also might describe or come to describe our lives, and I so look forward to, and hope you do as well, to our time together with her during the parish mission in March and learning how to find, understand and act on the purpose of our life, and that we ourselves, like St. Paul, might have a deeper share in the blessings of the Gospel.