

**Sermon for January 15, 2016 (Epiphany 2, Year A)**  
**Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary**

Texts: 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; Psalm 40:1-12; John 1:29-42

Title:

My dear friends: how do you share the experience of God's grace in your life?

My friends, we continue today in the Epiphany season. The feast of Epiphany proper takes place on January 6 every year, a fixed date in most church calendars since it was first celebrated in the second century in Egypt.

So the proper feast day has passed but we continue on now in the Epiphany season.

But what, after all, is epiphany?

Dictionaries speak of the feast on January 6, but they also tell us that an epiphany is a moment of illumination, a sudden discovery or perception, or a manifestation of something hidden or mysterious.

The reading from John's Gospel today records TWO of these kinds of epiphanies.

"The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!'"

That sure sounds like an epiphany, like a sudden awareness of a mystery, or a sudden glimpse of what previously was hidden.

One moment, from the perspective of the ordinary people around them, Jesus was simply one Jewish man among many, with a common name shared by thousands of others.

But the next moment, he is acclaimed as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

After two of John's disciples hear this and decide to investigate further, one of them – Andrew – goes to find his brother and says, "We have found the Messiah!"

That, too, is an epiphany! What had been previously hidden in secret, is now revealed and made known. The Messiah has come!

In between these two epiphanies, we have a remarkable little dialogue. The Lord sees these two following him and he asks, "What are you looking for?" That's really a rough translation of two simple words which mean, What do you seek?

To such a deep and profound question, these two have no answer! So they stick to more immediate practical concerns. "Where are you staying?"

And yet the Lamb of God goes deep once again. Jesus replies with a deceptively simple directive: "Come and see."

These are the very first spoken words coming from the incarnate Word in this Fourth Gospel: "What do you seek? ... Come and see."

These words sound simple enough, but they carry a deep weight of meaning in this Gospel.

Come and see. Nothing can ever replace the power of personal experience.

The things that you know most deeply to be true are those things which you have experienced firsthand in your life.

Explanations from others can never get to that deep intuitive place in your soul, which is reached only when you yourself come and see.

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But let me also call your attention back to our first reading today, because today marks the beginning of a short series on Paul's first letter to the Church in Corinth, and so a little background is in order.

Corinth was a vitally important city in the Mediterranean world. It sat, as it still does, on a thin isthmus only 4 miles wide which separated the Adriatic and the Aegean Seas, and which connected the northern mainland of Greece and the southern Peloponnesian peninsula.

Because of this setting, Corinth was the crossroads of the Mediterranean. People and influences from every part of the known world could be found there. It was the melting pot of the Roman world.

Now, if you don't know much about this first letter to the new church in Corinth, then let me tell you that it is all about conflict and trouble. Paul had founded this community a few years earlier. But now there were major problems in this young community of disciples, which is why Paul HAD to write this letter.

They were splitting into rival groups, based upon which teacher they liked the best. They had problems with promiscuity among their members. They were confused about marriage. They were speaking in tongues in a way which caused confusion in worship. There were problems of excluding some when they shared communion. They were confused about what Paul meant when he spoke of the resurrection.

Read through this letter and you will find problem after problem that Paul is forced to address. We have to assume that Paul heard about all of these problems through the reports from others, and so felt compelled to write this letter to provide some corrective guidance.

And yet, notice please how Paul starts this letter!  
Does he scold those troubled believers in Corinth?  
Does he let them know how disappointed he is?

NO! Amazingly, remarkably, Paul begins with thanksgiving!  
"I give thanks to my God always for you..."

Beyond, and underneath, all of the concerns and problems and frustrations that Paul felt, there remained an abiding gratitude that could not be overcome.

In case you need yet another reminder, this is again the reason why our regular gatherings every Sunday are called the Holy Eucharist. In the Greek, Paul writes "Eucharistow tow theow." I give thanks to God.

That remains, and always will remain, the core of what the church does when we gather together. That core of abiding gratitude to God will never be overcome, and we must never allow anything to diminish its light.

This is what is meant each time you are called to “Lift up your hearts” in the Great Thanksgiving, and you respond and say “We lift them to the Lord.”

In the midst of all the challenges of life – and they are legion! – yet each and every week, we come together and make our commitment once again. “We lift our hearts to the Lord.”

But even before he gets to this point, Paul begins his letter of teaching and correction by reminding his hearers of their new identity in God through what they have experienced.

“To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus”

To those who ARE sanctified in Christ Jesus. To those already made holy in Christ. Do you see? This has already been accomplished. It is the action of God, done by God, accomplished by the grace of God.

This is what John pointed to when he spoke of Jesus as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

This cleansing, this healing is the work of God which has an effect upon ALL humanity.

BUT to this finished work there is another added component.

“To those...called to be saints”. Called to be holy.

THIS part remains to be determined. THIS part depends upon the decisions and actions of the disciples themselves. And this is true for all who are in Christ.

It is NOT enough just to give thanks for what God has done. That is the foundation always and everywhere, but it is a foundation which must be acted upon.

Back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, John Henry Newman once wisely explained this when he said: “Grace will not baptize us while we sit at home, slighting the means which God has appointed.”

If you want to experience the grace of God continuing to work in your life, then you need to act upon it! Then you must get up and live out your calling!

This need for action was one of the abiding concerns of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. As a pastor, he understood the need for the church to act upon the saving grace of God, and not to become complacent or passive.

In his famous Letter from the Birmingham City Jail written in 1963, Dr. King gave the following description of the amazing power at work in the early church. Listen to his description:

“There was a time when the church was very powerful. It was during that period when the early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days, the church was not merely a **thermometer** that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a **thermostat** that transformed the mores (more-aze’) of society. Wherever the early Christians entered a town, the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being ‘disturbers of the peace’ and ‘outside agitators’. But they went on with the conviction that they were a ‘colony of heaven’, and had to obey God rather than man. They were small in number but big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be ...‘intimidated’. They brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contest.” (From Letter from Birmingham City Jail, 1963).

To those called to be holy, called to be saints, called to live as a colony of heaven, God has given power and grace in abundance.

But it must be acted upon!

As soon as Andrew followed Jesus and experienced his life-altering presence, he went right away to find his brother and to say, “We have found the Messiah!” And he brought Peter to the Lord, so that HE TOO could experience his grace.

There is an inherent restlessness built into the very DNA of the Church. We cannot rest. We cannot cease seeking, asking, knocking, longing to see God’s kingdom come and God’s will be done.

We cannot stop pushing forward, confronting evil and injustice wherever we see it.  
We cannot stop inviting others to a life of gratitude and praise and abundance in Christ.

And so I ask again: how do YOU share the experience of God's grace in your life?  
Amen.