

# *SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS*

**Epiphany Vb**

**February 5, 2006**

Pr. Robert M. Goldstein

*The True Faces of Our Lives*

Texts: Mark 1:29-39

This extraordinary reading from the Gospel of Mark once again presents Jesus as a person of *action*. First, it's Peter's mother in bed with a fever. Jesus whizzes by, takes her by the hand and gently lifts her from her bed, and now she is well enough to feed her sons and their guest.

But as the sun sets, there are knocks on Peter's door. He opens upon growing crowds of neighbors bringing their loved ones afflicted with all kinds of physical and mental illnesses. They want this Jesus because they believe he can heal them. I wonder what goes through Peter's mind with all those sick and mentally ill people at his door. Nevertheless, Jesus heals many, but not all. That's the extraordinary in our Gospel reading. Whoever has ears to hear let them hear!

Mark wants us to see what he remembers so tellingly: Jesus, a person with great gifts of charisma and authority -all tightly bound together by decisive action. Then, just as dramatically, Mark takes us to a completely different dimension of the power and authority of Jesus. For an undoubtedly exhausted Jesus gets up, walks outside into the pre-dawn darkness, finds a deserted place and prays.

We do not know what he prays about. We do know that he prays alone, and then, in that enchanting time before dawn, when the night itself seems to beg for the dawn to appear, Jesus rallies his half-awake disciples-in-training with a heroic cry to go on to the neighboring towns and more of the exhausting same, "for that is what I came out to do." Clearly, Mark is portraying a Jesus, rested and regenerated in body and spirit, ready for action, ready for more. Here is a person with a mission! Here is a person excited with his vocation in life!

Speaking of vocations, we celebrate this morning the patron saints of our predecessor churches: St. Ansgar of Denmark and St. Henry of Finland.

Ansgar was sent by Rome to evangelize Scandinavia in the 820's. He converted King Harold of Denmark and went on to Sweden where he founded the first Christian church in Sweden around 832. He campaigned against slavery and was greatly devoted

to the poor and sick. But the Vikings were a stubborn lot (don't we know!). After his death they went back to their traditional Viking religions.

Almost three centuries later, Henry, an Englishman, rose rapidly in the Swedish court and was appointed Bishop of Uppsala, Sweden in 1148. He went on to begin missionary work with the Finns but was murdered mindlessly by a disgruntled soldier.

Ansgar worked hard and had nothing left to show for it. And yet, when Henry comes along three centuries later, there is now a need for a *bishop* in Uppsala. Yet, even Henry's gifted life ends so pointlessly. What can we glean from these vocations, their callings?

While none of us has the charisma, energy and authority that Jesus has -- or even that of Ansgar and Henry, we all have been given a vocation, a calling in life. But how do you really feel about your vocation when Monday morning comes around? If I were to take a picture of you in your car or on the train or bus on your way to work or school on Monday morning what kind of face would I see? Grim determination? Dread? Boredom? Passivity? Joy? Peace?

One of Luther's great insights in the Reformation Gospel is the concept of vocation. Luther showed the meaning of vocation by pointing to the person who swept Wittenberg's lecture halls and said that that janitor had a vocation equal to all princes and priests in the sight of God. Everyone's vocation, unequal in the world's view, was of equal value in the Gospel before God. Religious vocations were not superior to secular vocations -- all vocations, religious and secular, yours and mine, are of equal value before God.

Luther lifted the near slavery of peasant labor to equality with the princes of the realm in the Lutheran reform of Catholicism. This means that, in Christ, your life has wholeness and integrity to it. Whether you are the young child or the aging senior, or anything in between, there is in your life story the blessing that God has called you on your path through life. If you have regrets, sins, mistakes made, it is time you lifted them up to God, so God can help you let them go.

My task in part is to remind you and to remind myself that while our lives may look at times like we have no future, no true happiness -- just as Ansgar's efforts seemingly came to nought, that there is a bigger picture that we cannot see. A picture that only God sees. As our Hebrew reading of Isaiah put it so well:

*It is the Holy One who sits above the circle of the earth,*

*And its inhabitants, us, are like grasshoppers...*

Grasshoppers and humans do not have a full view, even when we are presumptuous to think we really do. That belongs to God. But in our stories that are our lives God gives us some clues.

Isaiah has something more to say to us all:

*God gives power to the faint, strengthens the powerless.  
Even the young will faint or grow weary... But those who **wait** for the Most High shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.*

Ansgar was surely tempted to die in deep despair at what he saw as the failed fruit of his wasted labors in Sweden. But Henry's appointment as bishop of Uppsala, Sweden, three centuries later, was the true and bigger picture of the Most High. Ansgar could not know this, but he could die in faith waiting for God like an expectant mother, believing still that God has plans for Sweden and Uppsala. In God's time, not Ansgar's, this became reality.

Is not the message for us here that, while parts of our lives become confusing or our future very unclear, they are clear to God in ways we cannot yet or may never comprehend? We can wait for the Most High, that is, hope that God's will be done with our labors in ways we do not yet see.

Let us give thanks for the blessings of our lives, for our vocations, for the paths we have traveled in this wondrous existence. If we cannot see, then receive from God the grace to wait and to hope. Let our lives begin anew each day with such hopeful waiting. For thus, on our way to work, to school, and back home again, yes, even to death itself, we can show the true faces of our lives.

*Amen*

St. Francis Lutheran Church  
152 Church Street, SF, CA 94114-1111  
Phone: (415) 621-2635; Fax: (415) 621-8819  
E-mail: StFrancisSF@sbcglobal.net

[www.st-francis-lutheran.org](http://www.st-francis-lutheran.org)