

Dear friends in Christ



February 6, 2022, Epiphany 5

“Exceeds All Expectations”

The Rev. Dr. John C. Forney

Isaiah 6:1-8 (9-13); Psalm 138; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11;

Luke 5:1-11

Every spring our little church in Petersburg would host what was called “Soup and Sandwiches.” This was an opportunity for cannery workers who lived in what was known as “Tent City” an opportunity for a good meal and fellowship. Most of the churches in town participated.

And many years there was the discussion around the question, “Why should we always do this?”

One year I distinctly remember the answer of our junior warden, “Well, isn’t this what Jesus would want us to do?”

The quick rejoinder, “Is he going to pay for it?”

I’m thinking, pay what? We’re out a bit of electricity and heating oil. No big deal. Then the answer came to me.

“Yes, he’s going to pay for it. Jesus is going to use my wallet and any other wallet and checkbook here that’s been through the waters of baptism and he’s

going to foot the bill.” And, again that year, he more than paid for it. In abundance.

That’s because “Abundance” is the hallmark of his ministry. Not scarcity. Jesus came to announce God’s Abundance. This guy EXCEEDS ALL EXPECTATIONS.

Exactly the abundance that issued from the call of Isaiah. As the temple filled with smoke and supernal visages soared through the chaos, Isaiah trembled in fear. A cosmic extravaganza worthy of a Superbowl halftime. He was not up to whatever was going on. This was time for a 911 call into Ghostbusters. The space-time continuum was coming unstuck. Seraphs and whole host of God-knows-what-else to materialize out of the noxious cloud. [Is this sentence complete? Noxious needs an “i”]

Throughout it all reverberated the earsplitting, “Holy, holy, holy,” of the phantasmagoric scene. Mega boom-box sound turned to the max.

“And I said: ‘Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the king, the Lord of Hosts!’”

Actually, that’s probably not what he really said. It was more like, “HOLY CRAP!” AM I SCREWED!!! WE’RE ALL SCREWED.

Yes, we all are. Terminally, abysmally ignorant of what makes for any kind of life, any kind of society. We’re in deep stuff.

“Then I heard a voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

Now, I don’t know about the physicality of that vision, if this stuff really, really happened, the temple being filled with a Fourth of July fireworks production; or if what had transpired was solely between Isaiah’s two ears. But whatever it was, God had Isaiah’s complete and undivided attention.

It was either respond or just give up – lay [lie] down and die – a do-or-not-do moment.

In all the smoke and din Isaiah had a choice. And don't we all?

Isaiah chose LIFE and ABUNDANCE – a more excellent way. He chose to be a servant of that Word given him. His answer to that call would exceed all expectations. That's always God's call to each of us. And in our acceptance, might we catch a faint echo of that haunting refrain, "Holy, holy, holy."

In an instant, not only Isaiah's wallet, but his entire life was baptized in that fire and smoke. Imagine! And all this time I thought it was about the car, the chicks and the loudest boom box on the stereo system. Was I ever out to lunch! Clueless.

I don't know about an unclean people, but in the midst of this raging pandemic we're surely reading about a whole bunch of deluded, thoughtless people. As our football season draws to a close, several teams are headed for the playoffs and it's all on the line. How many fans will be crowded together cheek by jowl without any masks? We may or may not be a people of unclean lips, but certainly a people of little sense. It's into this imbecility God's call comes. That's how it found each of us. Not always in our brightest moments.

For all who answer, God's will is to exceed our expectations. Those who answer are called from the kitchen, from cotton fields, university classrooms. They are called from long lines of preachers. They are called from mind-numbing work in Amazon fulfillment centers and post offices. Called from union halls and corporate executive suites, or off the factory floor. Called to exceed all expectations.

I caught the vision at a speech by Dr. King. We are all here because of some event, some vision, some nudge. My Methodist friends call this prevenient grace – grace that goes before us, directing us to where Life is to be had.

One of my Pilgrim Place friends posted the story of the fortuitous intersection between one of God's servants, Martin Luther King, Jr. and a young boy.

This was an eleven-year-old white boy living in the black section of Kentucky, living for the fall of 1969 with his mom, both guests of Dr. Abbie Clement Jackson, his mom's best friend and a national leader in the AME Zion Church. Abbie became over that fall his adopted grandma. David Russell, a relative of one of the Pilgrims here at Pilgrim Place, shares his remembrance of the in-the-flesh Good News of healing and restoration:¹

"One Saturday morning, Grandma Abbie asked me to wait by the front door to greet her 'escort' and let her know he was here to walk her down to the AME church conference where Grandma was the keynote speaker that day. Her 'escort' was Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. He was already becoming well known and I was excited!

"Later that afternoon, King, Jr. and [the boy's] parents came back to the house for tea, coffee, treats and conversation with Grandma, Mom and me. At one point, Martin Luther King Jr. turned to me and asked: "David what is it like being the only white boy in an all-Negro school?" I thought for a moment about my friends Cecil and Ellis, my Scout troop, my church and I said... "It's normal".

"The 'Beloved Community' begins when we can feel comfortable in our own skins and respect the skin of the person next to us. When we look into each other's eyes and begin to see a Child of God, then being together in community begins to be 'normal.'"

This was a journey that summer exceeding all expectations.

The vision of what might be, what ought to be, came to Fanny Lou Hamer, a little girl with no more than a sixth-grade education who toiled in the cotton fields of Mississippi to help support her impoverished family.

Fannie Lou was raised up to be one of the most powerful women in the civil rights movement of the sixties, a giant for justice.

¹ David, Russell, "Little Blessings," Shared by sister-in-law Marry Russell in the Pilgrim Place Google Group (with permission) January 17, 2022.

Kate Larson, in her new biography of Fannie Lou, *Walk with Me*², brings this amazing woman's story to life. Fannie's moment comes as a spokeswoman for the Mississippi Freedom Delegation to the Democratic National Convention in 1964. They were demanding to be seated in place of the all-white segregationist official slate of delegates from that state.

Here's Fannie's story as told by her biographer:

"She wore a borrowed dress, one suitable for such an important occasion. A Mississippi sharecropper, she never had new things. Used, reused, patched, and patched again—these defined the fabric of her everyday experience. Someone loaned her white shoes and a white purse, too. From her seat at the table at the front of a packed hearing room, she scanned the faces of the men and women waiting to hear her testimony. The din of the conversations and rustling papers and creaking chairs muffled the notice of whirring television cameras. She folded her hands to steady herself. A man to her right gave her the cue to start.

"Mr. Chairman, and to the Credentials Committee, my name is Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, and I live at 626 East Lafayette Street, Ruleville, Mississippi, Sunflower County, the home of Senator James O. Eastland and Senator Stennis. It was the thirty-first of August in 1962 that eighteen of us traveled twenty-six miles to the county courthouse in Indianola to try to register to become first-class citizens.' Her white landlord, she said, evicted her when she returned home that night from Indianola because he told her, 'We are not ready for that in Mississippi.'"

Fannie Lou and more than sixty other Mississippians had gone to Atlantic City, site of the convention, to press their case to unseat the white segregationist delegation.

"It was late in the afternoon and the summer humidity seeped into the crowded room. Hamer's brown skin glistened with sweat. The committee members shifted and settled in their seats, and the chatter in the room subsided into a few whispers. The white Mississippi delegates shook their heads to disgust while she spoke. Without notes, from memory, from her heart, Hamer recounted the struggles, terror, and violence she had endured trying to do the most basic thing a citizen of any county can do: register to vote.

² Kate Clifford Larson, *Walk with Me: A Biography of Fannie Lou Hamer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

“Her Mississippi drawl ebbed and flowed through her words, giving them a cadence that drew the audience in. She described the death threats and gunshots that had rewarded her demands for civil rights. The room grew quiet. When she recounted how brutally the police had beaten her one day for standing up, eyes welled with tears.

“Her eight-minute plea ended with a question that haunted many for years afterward. ‘Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hooks because our lives are threatened daily, because we want to live as decent human beings in America?’

President Johnson, fearing he might lose that white segregationist vote, fearing the attention Fannie’s address to the convention was getting, to distract the national attention, called an impromptu press conference. A conference called on the spot, right in the middle of Fannie’s address, succeeded in capturing the media for three and a half minutes.

“Johnson miscalculated, however. The television cameras had kept rolling through her speech, capturing her every word, and the evening news programs replayed her testimony and the ovation that followed. The whole nation watched as a dirt-poor Mississippi sharecropper with a sixth-grade education shamed them into acknowledging how deeply and profoundly broken American democracy had become. That day, Fannie Lou Hamer called on Americans to walk with her toward equality and justice for all.³

Certainly exceeded President Johnson’s expectations.

This, a Gospel Journey that has exceeded all expectations. And there are still miles to go. This work is not done. And so it is with us here at St. Francis.

As with the call of Isaiah, as with the summons of Jesus that morning to those on a fishing excursion. Fished all night caught nary a minnow. Jesus instructed them, instructs us, to keep at it. Lower your nets a little deeper. That’s what Jesus tells his disciples. “Lower your nets a bit deeper.” God alone knows what’s in the offing.

³ Op.cit., 1-2.

Who knows what that effort will surface? Just might be beyond our puny expectations.

This morning each of us might have been in a dozen other places. But we've chosen to be here. Let's hope and pray and see what God might do with us. The results just might astound. Exceed all expectations. So, here we are, O Lord. Here we are. Send us. Amen