“It’s About Life”

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
John 17:1-5
January 12, 2014
Jesus said, “I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). Jesus doesn’t only offer us afterlife; he offers us abundant life.

We’re focusing, in this New Year, on the life Jesus offers people. We’re inviting you to read a daily devotional written by psychologist Gary Moon called *Apprenticeship with Jesus*. It’s not too late for you to join us. We’re on Day 8 of this 30-day journey.

I’m struck by something Moon writes on Day 2, namely that “Many Christians take a vampire approach to being a Christian. We want just a little blood for our sins, enough for eternal life but not a total transfusion of Jesus’ life and character.” This might explain why, in Moon’s words, Christians divorce, perpetrate abuse, view pornography and give modestly to charity to the same degree as our nonbelieving neighbors. The mentality that salvation is something futuristic and far away has undoubtedly contributed to this malaise. Moon writes on the first page of his devotional, “Christianity has an image problem—especially among those in the 16 to 29 age bracket—in large part because of the lack of authentic transformation of the people wearing the label “Christian.” People would be attracted to Jesus if his followers resembled him more closely. What is needed is not a vampire approach to the faith, just enough blood to get us into heaven but not enough to make any appreciable difference in our lives. We need a total transfusion of Christ’s life and character.

Jesus talks endlessly about life. He references the word life 50 times in John’s gospel alone. The life Jesus offers has two essential characteristics.

First, the life Jesus offers is qualitatively different from ordinary life. Jesus doesn’t merely offer everlasting life; he offers abundant life. Ordinary life in the Greek is called bios life. It’s where we derive our English word biology. We measure bios life in terms of years. Bios life means having a pulse.

Jesus hardly ever speaks of bios life in his life and ministry. Instead, he uses another Greek word, zoe, meaning life in its essence and fullness. Zoe is life as God intends it to be. I have come that you might have zoe life and have it abundantly.

John’s gospel references seven of Jesus’ famous “I am” declarations. These “I am” declarations supply a vivid assortment of metaphors to describe this zoe life. In John 4, he speaks of offering a woman “living water” (10-14). In John 6, he talks about giving his disciples “the bread of
life” (35, 38). In John 10, Jesus references himself as the door or gateway to abundant living (7, 8, 9, 11, 14). In John 11, he asserts to being “the resurrection and the life” (25). In John 14, he claims to be “the way, the truth and the life” (6). In John 15, the subject of last Sunday’s sermon, Jesus affirms, “I am the true vine and you are the branches” (1, 5).

Secondly, the life Jesus offers is available to us now. We don’t have to wait to die to experience this life. We can enter it now. Every time Jesus speaks about eternal life he uses present tense. He declares in John 3, “Whoever believes in me has eternal life (36). In John 5, he says, “Anyone who hears my words and believes him who sent me has eternal life (24). Eternal life is more than a get-out-of-hell-free card.

I read earlier Jesus’ prayer before his arrest and trial. Jesus gives thanks for his authority to bestow eternal life on his followers (17:2). Then, in verse 3 he declares, “Now this is eternal life.” As I hear these words I anticipate Jesus is going to pray about something profound related to the afterlife. Instead, he prays, “Now this is eternal life: that we may know you and your Son Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”

Everything hinges on this one little word “know.” Jesus is not merely speaking about an intellectual type of knowing. The Christian life has intellectual properties. Jesus instructs us to love God with “all our mind.” But there is a world of difference between knowing Christ and merely knowing about him.

Someone asked me this week whether I know so and so. I answered that I don’t actually know him. I know about him, but I don’t actually know him. There is a world of difference between knowing Christ and knowing about him.

Jesus makes such a distinction in this verse about the importance of both knowing God and knowing Jesus Christ. I take this to mean that we’re not at liberty to know God any which way we choose. We know God in the manner in which God has been revealed. God becomes known through Jesus Christ. This is why we make such a big deal of Jesus.

Knowing Jesus, therefore, is personal and relational. He’s not a static deity; he’s dynamic and life-giving. Knowing Jesus involves friendship and even intimacy.
So what difference does this sermon make in my life? Let me illustrate the point I’m trying to make. Suppose you live in a day and age when cars haven’t been invented. You’ve never driven a car or been its passenger. Someone tells you that you are about to receive a gift that will take you wherever you want to go. Your walking days will be over! When the big day comes, you are handed the keys to your brand new car. You put the key into the ignition and drive away. No one has told you to release the parking brake. You can’t understand why you are going 20 mph when everybody else is doing 60. But just the same, you’re happy. It sure beats walking.

Your car also comes equipped with headlights for nighttime driving. You’re not told that these headlamps are designed for night driving. How are you supposed to know? So, for the rest of your life, you drive 20 mph during daylight hours.

Jesus offers abundant life. His offer seems too good to be true, so we surmise Jesus must really be talking about the sweet by and by. It’s as though he offers us a new car and we proceed to drive it during daylight hours with the brake on! He offers us abundant life and we’re content just on getting by.

Near the end of his gospel, John supplies us with a one-verse purpose statement: “These things are written that you may believe Jesus is the Son of God, and by believing, you may have life in his name” (20:31). It’s all about life, folks. Jesus doesn’t merely offer us an afterlife; he offers us abundant life.

The devotional we’re reading is presented each day with a story, a reflection and an apprenticeship activity. In Day 2, the author adapts the well-known, 12-step AA method to the process of becoming more like Christ. I’ve always wanted to preach a series of sermons on the 12 steps of AA. These steps capture what it means to practice raw honesty and a willingness to surrender our wills to God and Christ.

The first three steps deal specifically with this theme of knowing God and Christ. Step 1 begins with the admission of brokenness and the acknowledgement that our lives have become unmanageable. I get that we are broken each in our own way but the unmanageable part initially seemed like overkill. Have our lives really become unmanageable? But if I have a hard time controlling my anger or letting go of bitterness or turning my back on lust, pride or some other besetting sin, then my life has become unmanageable.
Step 2 acknowledges that Christ’s power can restore me to sanity or well-being. Step 3 leads me to make a conscious decision to turn my life and will over to God. I’m essentially asking for a transfusion of Christ’s life and character.

The next four steps shift the emphasis from knowing God to knowing self. This is intentional given that knowing God and knowing self are inescapably related. In step 4, I make a searching and fearless inventory of my life. The words “searching and fearless” are so descriptive of the intentionality of this moral inventory. Step 5 resolves to admit to God, to myself and to at least one other person the nature of my wrongs. Step 6 puts me into a ready position to allow God to remove my defects of character and replace them with Christ’s life and character. Step 7 asks for God’s continued help in letting go of this frequent temptation to live life on my terms.

In this third quadrant, the emphasis shifts to making amends to people we have wronged. Notice, I don’t wait for someone else to make the first move. I take responsibility for my part of the relationship failure. Step 8 makes a list of people I have wronged. Please God, don’t make me do this! Step 9 makes direct amends to those I have injured. Step 10 insures that this won’t be a once and done exercise. I promise to repeat this process as many times as necessary.

The last two steps focus on what I need to do in the future to practice Christ’s presence. Step 11 commits me to engage in the classic Christian disciplines of prayer and Scripture meditation to improve my conscious contact with God. Step 12 insures that as I experience transformation I will endeavor to share this message with other people as appropriate.

As you consider these four quadrants—that of acknowledging our brokenness and turning our lives over to God, self-examination, making amends and practicing the disciplines, ask what quadrant you need to address at this season of your life. To say that you’re going to work on all four quadrants is unrealistic and, perhaps, even a cop out. Identify one
quadrant for deliberate attention and effort. I’ll give you time to reflect on these quadrants and decide which one you will devote your best energies. Then we’ll close in prayer.

I acknowledge my brokenness to you, loving God. There are whole areas of my life that have become unmanageable. I make the conscious decision to turn my life and my will to your care and entrust this life of mine to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. I’m ready to make a searching and fearless inventory of my life. I’m letting go of the desire to live life on my own terms. I resolve with your help to make amends to people I have wronged. I pray for a fresh infusion of your Spirit to practice a life of prayer and listen to your Word in Scripture. I pray in Jesus’ name, Amen.