

EASTER IV

'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.' John 10:10

In a few joyous moments we will welcome Eloise Marjorie Stedman into the Body of Christ through the sacrament of baptism. Baptisms are always special events. But even in a community where all children are wanted and cherished, and where some have been long sought and hard won, Eloise stands out as a special blessing.

I preached at the Easter Vigil that what I most want for people who follow Jesus is freedom: freedom *from* fear. And then, freedom *for* the abundant life Jesus promises in today's Gospel. God wants us to have abundant life. Jesus wants us to have abundant life. Full life, joyful life, grateful life.

We live in a society of abundance; perhaps it's inconceivable to us how much the promise of abundance must have meant to Jesus' followers, in a time and place where scarcity was the norm for 90% of the people. Abundance, material abundance, was the lot of a very, very fortunate very few.

But was Jesus talking about material abundance? Probably not; he's probably talking about abundant life of the spirit. And that's what followers of Jesus, then and now, are looking for, is it not? If we care about material abundance, we find it in another realm of life. But we also find, as followers of Jesus did, that if our spiritual lives are rich and full, the material seems to matter less.

As Luke describes the early Christian community in the passage from

Acts we just heard, All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.

When Maggie and Ed first came to us just 3 years ago, they were facing a terrible loss. They were going to lose a baby. They came to help with the decision about how that loss would happen; that it would happen was inevitable. My counsel to them was to choose the alternative that would be least unbearable for them, and that no matter what they chose, God would be with them.

Maggie and Ed emerged from this sad trauma saying how blessed they felt: how well taken care of. Talk about amazing grace, amazing gratitude! Talk about finding steadfast faith and thankfulness in the midst of great sorrow. Abundant life— Maggie and Ed found that in the midst of their mourning.

And then, if that were not trial enough, Maggie endured lymphoma and its treatment. Still, all we heard from her and Ed was gratitude, appreciation for life's blessings, and for the community they'd found themselves in. And throughout this ordeal they both kept serving St. John's in many, many ways.

When we held a memorial service for Trevor, the Stedman's lost baby, we read the 23rd Psalm, that most beloved of all Psalms, which we've prayed again this morning. And that Psalm gives us a vision of what the abundant life promised by Jesus might be.

We shall not want. We lie down in green pastures; God leads us beside still waters; God restores our souls and leads us in right paths

When we walk through the darkest valley, we fear no evil; for God is

with us and comforts me. Our cups overflow. Goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our lives.

It is this abundance into which Eloise is blessed to have been born. She has been born into a family where she will learn to love music and gardening, cooking and travel. More important, she has been born into a family where faith and gratitude are the sustenance of life. She will learn to encounter adversity and affliction with grace and strength. She will learn from parents who believe and feel that God is always with them, their comfort and their guide, and we pray she will find the same truths for herself.

Today, with great celebration, we invite Eloise to begin her journey of faith, her life in community. We will promise to *do all in our power to support her in her life in Christ.* We know, sadly, that we will not be providing that support in person for long, as Eloise will move with her parents in the summer. But we make the promise on behalf of the entire Body of Christ, on behalf of all the faithful believers and followers of Jesus she'll encounter during her spiritual journey.

And we pray that she may know the joys of abundant life in her waking and her sleeping, in her work and in her play, even in her sorrow, and that she will dwell in the house of God forever. Alleluia, Alleluia! Amen

