

The Rev. Lisa Graves  
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Sermon: Things Left Undone  
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“It may be said  
that there are two great beginnings  
in the life of every one  
who has left a mark upon history.  
There is the day  
when he is born into the world;  
and there is the day  
when he discovers  
why he was born into the world.”

These are the words  
of Scottish theologian  
and prolific author William Barclay.  
He writes eloquently about  
the birth of Jesus  
as the great beginning for the world  
and Jesus’ first Passover visit  
to Jerusalem as another  
great beginning  
the day when Jesus realizes  
his purpose as he lingers  
in his father’s house.

I would add that these two  
great beginnings belong to everyone,  
for everyone makes a mark  
on history seen or unseen.

There is not one of us here  
that does not change the world  
somehow just by being in it.

That is the great beginning  
of our birth, the difference  
we make in the world  
simply by being in it.  
Today's Gospel is a dichotomy of purpose.  
The rich man lives a lavish life.  
He is clothed  
in fine purple robes and linen –  
priestly robes that cost more  
than most people made in a year.

He feasted daily on gourmet food,  
and the word used for feasting  
in this passage implies  
an exotic meal with sumptuous  
meats and sweets.

He dined this way daily,  
In an age when most people  
Were pleased to eat meat once a week.

Here is a man who is living well.  
He is a stark contrast to Lazarus,  
a pitiful creature who dines  
on the crumbs that fall  
from this man's table.

There were no napkins  
or utensils at this time.  
The very wealthy would  
wipe their hands on hunks of bread  
that were then tossed aside.

This is what Lazarus waited for,  
so weak he was unable

to keep the street dogs  
from licking the ulcerated wounds  
that covered his body.

When both men had died,  
the rich man was condemned  
not for any evil thing he had done,  
but for the good deeds  
he had left undone.

It is not that he was cruel  
to Lazarus in life.  
He allowed Lazarus  
to lay at his gate,  
eat his leavings and coexist  
in his world.  
But he did nothing  
to alleviate the suffering he saw.

The rich man lived his life  
as if his birth, his very existence  
was all the beginning he needed.

He believed his wealth and status  
were his reason for being born  
and so he lived indulgently.  
His sin was never really noticing Lazarus.

Barclay says “his sin was that  
he could look on the world’s  
suffering and need and feel  
no answering sword  
of grief and pity  
pierce his heart;

he looked at a fellow man,  
hungry and in pain  
and did nothing about it.  
He never searched beyond  
the event of his birth  
for his purpose in this life,  
for that next great beginning.

The next great beginning  
is when we discover why we are born.

This is a dramatic event for some –  
the day they realize they are called  
to serve the lowest among us,  
like Mother Theresa,  
the day they realize they are called  
to right injustice,  
like Martin Luther King.

But each of us have our own  
epiphanies of purpose  
that frame out life with meaning.

Many of us find our purpose  
in our work, or our role as parent.  
Some of us have several episodes  
of clarity when we know  
that we are doing God's will,  
serving our purpose in the world.

That feeling that we are  
making a difference  
in some way that is important.

But I would argue

that many of us do not  
remember that new beginning  
or sense of life purpose  
because it starts  
in the waters of baptism.  
It is at the baptismal font  
that we are given  
new life as a Christian,  
the follower of God's own  
new beginning and imbued  
with purpose in the vows  
we say or that are promised  
on our behalf.

Living into the vows of baptism  
call us to a purpose that gives us life.

We promise to renounce evil  
and all those things  
that separate us from  
the will and love of God.

We promise to follow Christ as Lord.

Three of the vows we make  
Might have allowed the rich man  
to find his purpose  
and notice the suffering of Lazarus.

In baptism we promise

to proclaim by word and example  
the Good News of God in Christ.  
To seek and serve Christ  
in all persons  
by loving our neighbor  
as ourselves; and by  
striving for justice and peace  
among all people,  
and respecting the dignity  
of every human being.

It is in living the vows  
made at baptism  
that our life is enriched,  
and given meaning.

We are given the gift of life  
through birth and gift of new life  
through baptism.

Barclay says that if we possess  
the truth of God's word and life  
we will notice the world  
and be moved, compelled  
to be the good news  
to those around us.

May God bless the world  
through your birth  
and gift you with the knowledge  
of your life's purpose;  
to follow him and be  
his heart and hands

at work in this world. Amen.