

“The Surprise Behind the Door”

*“I am the door”, says Jesus.
“I’ve come that my sheep might have life and have it abundantly.”*

“I am the door.” It’s a strange image, isn’t it? Jesus is the door to life abundant.

Doors divide 2 spaces from each other.

So if Jesus is the door, that means that on one side of the door there is life abundant
and on the other side? normal, every-day, ordinary human existence.

On one side is normal every-day, ordinary, routine human existence,
the kind of life that everyone on this earth lives.

On the other side is life that is as completely different from ordinary life
as the land of Oz is different from Kansas.

It’s a life that is richer, fuller, deeper, and broader,
a life that’s more vivid, more vibrant, more exciting, and more adventurous,
a life that’s more meaningful, more purposeful, more rewarding and more fulfilling.

How many of you have ever read The Chronicles of Narnia by C. S. Lewis?

Anybody remember what they’re about?

That’s right, they’re about 4 ordinary children who, during World War II,
are taken out of London to keep them safe in the country.

They are staying at the home of an elderly relative, & while they’re playing hide & seek 1 day,
one of them hides in an old wardrobe and somehow discovers that the back of the wardrobe is a door
and when he opens the door and steps through it, he finds he’s in an entirely different world,
in a land he learns is called Narnia.

Now it’s not that Narnia is a perfect world – it’s not perfect by any means.

There’s good and evil in that world just as there is good and evil in this one.

But for the children who end up there, Narnia is a place of magic and mystery and miracles.

It’s a place where things matter more.

It’s a place where they find they are no longer insignificant, powerless children,
but rather significant, important, young people with a call on their lives,
people who have been given a purpose and destiny,
people on whom much depends,
people whose lives matter not just to themselves but to the everyone in the kingdom.

They fight for truth and beauty and goodness and love, even as they fail at times,
and eventually they are made kings and queens.

And all that they do is out of love and loyalty for Aslan, the talking lion, the King of Beasts,
the wise, compassionate, magical authority, and Narnia’s guardian and savior.

I don’t think it a coincidence that Lewis chose a door as the entrance to Narnia,

for what Lewis was trying to do was to help people understand
that when Jesus said, “I am the door – the door into abundant life”,
he was not speaking metaphorically or symbolically or poetically;
Jesus was talking about something very real.

And if you doubt, we are talking about reality here instead of metaphor,
remember that this passage comes right after Jesus’ healing of the man born blind,
who, if he heard someone relegate these words of Jesus to metaphor or symbol,
would jump up and yell, “I am NOT a metaphor!”

What both Jesus and C. S. Lewis were saying is that there are 2 ways of living –
we can keep on living the every-day, normal, routine, physical, material life
that we and every other human being are born into,
or we can open the door of Jesus and step into an entirely different kind of life,
a life of faith, a life lived intentionally in partnership with God,
a life that is overflowing with an abundance of the gifts of the Spirit,
with love & joy, peace & patience, faithfulness & kindness, goodness & gentleness, and self-control,
a life that is full of signs and wonders and miracles.

So, let me ask you....

Have you ever stepped through that door?

Have you ever stepped out of ordinary, routine, normal life into something

that is so much richer and fuller and deeper and more vibrant than what you knew before?

And if you have stepped through that door, was it just once or a couple of times or do you step through it often?

If I were to answer that question, I would say that there were certainly times throughout my life

when God has opened that door and given me a glimpse of what's inside.

And there have been a few times when God transported me into that different world

for a short period of time and I'd hear God speak to me, or a prayer would be answered,

or I would be healed of some illness, or some serendipitous events would occur.

But those were extraordinary things that just "happened" to me from time to time.

What I didn't know until 4 or 5 years ago, was that there was actually a door that I could open,

and that I could actually choose to step through that door and live in that other world whenever I wanted.

Jesus is the door, and you can only open that door and step into the world of abundant life through faith.

You can only find the door and see the door through faith.

And you can only walk through that doorway and into that other world through faith.

And you can only stay in that world through faith,

because as soon as you doubt, you find yourself right back in the old, ordinary, routine, every-day world.

So what's it like to live in that world?

Well you've all heard Cindy's God sightings

and it's not only the stories that she tells but it's the excitement in her eyes and her voice.

Sometimes there's deep emotion & tears, and sometimes there's so much joy that she can't keep from laughing.

When she talks about her God-sightings, she's talking about abundant life,

about living in that world that is so rich & full & vibrant & magical & mystical & amazing.

But Cindy is not the only one who has a God-sightings.

My favorite one at Workcamp was of a group of girls

who were given the assignment about building a deck and they had no idea where to begin.

One of the girls dismayingly said, "What we need is Bob the Builder!"

And right at that moment a man from Tabor church looked over the fence at the girls and said,

"Hi, I'm Bob. Do you girls need some help?"

His name really was Bob!

He was a parishioner of mine who just happened to live next door to the house that was being worked on.

And it just happened that he put his head over the fence at the very moment

somebody had asked for Bob the Builder.

Of course none of that just "happened".

That was God at work on that other side of the door in that land of life abundant.

The first time I ever heard God-sightings outside of Workcamp

was when I attended New Direction Ministries worship services

and almost every week someone would give a testimony of some amazing thing that God had done.

And after I heard about all of the things God was doing,

I began to believe that maybe God could do those kinds of things for me, too.

And, of course, as soon as I started believing that, as soon as I started having faith,

as soon as I stepped through that door into the land of life abundant,

then God did those kinds of things for me, too.

Jeanette and Cindy and I are on a 6:30 prayer call most mornings
and many of those mornings people testify to what God is doing in their lives,
to signs and wonders and miracles and answered prayer.
Those are people that live in that other world of life abundant.

You may have the same kind of stories, but you may not be used to telling them, but here's the thing.
The more you tell people about what God is doing, the more God does,
and the more God lets you see what God is doing, and then the more you have to tell. It builds on itself.
So if you have a God-sighting, for heaven's sake, don't keep it to yourself,
because if you keep it to yourself, you likely won't see the next one.

So just to make it a bit clearer what I'm talking about, let me tell you about some God-sightings that I had recently
when I was when I stepped through that door and into that world of abundant life.

I visited Frank in the hospital on March 30, and Grace & Hope arrived, and Grace was walking.
One week later, Grace and Hope were visiting Frank again and they were pretty sure it would be the last time.
They said their goodbyes and left the hospital.

On their way home a song came onto the radio, a song Frank had loved, a song called, "I'll Fly Away".
As they listened to the song, they knew it was a message that God was giving to them from Frank,
and by the time they arrived home, the phone was ringing to tell them that Frank had died.

I was, of course, keeping Grace in my prayers, but I was pretty sure she wouldn't last too long without Frank,
and so the person I was most concerned about was Hope,
because if she were to lose both parents on top of just having gone through a divorce,
it would be very hard, and I knew she wasn't active in her church.

I prayed for her and so I wasn't surprised at all then
when I got the call that they would really like to have Frank's funeral at Trinity in Milford
where Hope was a nominal member.

I was very glad for that because I knew it would give Hope a chance to get to know her pastor better,
a pastor who it just so happens has gone through a divorce himself, and has recently remarried.
I was sad I wouldn't be doing Frank's funeral at Salem, but I was grateful that God had heard my prayer for Hope.
And then Grace called to say she'd like Jeanette & me & Pastor Files to all 3 officiate.
She asked me to pick the lessons, Jeanette to sing, and Pastor Files to preach.
That felt 100% right.

They wanted the funeral that next Saturday which would have been the 15th,
but the church wasn't available that day, so Grace asked me if I was available on the 22nd.

I opened up my calendar and the first thing I saw was that it was Earth Day
and when I mentioned that to Grace, she said that was absolutely perfect.

The Tuesday before, Pastor Files said he'd be meeting with Hope & Grace on zoom at 12:30
and invited Jeanette and me to join them and we did.

It had only been a week and a half since I had seen Grace walking at the hospital
so I was really surprised to see her in a hospital bed with oxygen in her nose.
She seemed to doze for part of the meeting and, when she did speak, it was with great effort.
I texted Carol to let her know and Carol was completely flabbergasted
as she had just seen her the day before and she was fine.

But we got the funeral planned and during the planning they asked Jeanette what she was going to sing,
and Jeannette (being Jeanette) said, "Well, I probably won't know that until I get there."

So Pastor Chris said, "Well, what would you like us to put in the bulletin?"

And Jeanette thought for a moment and said, "A tribute to Frank".

And then she said "Oh, no, make it a tribute to Frank and Grace."

We finished that meeting Tuesday at 1:30.

On Wednesday at 1:30 I was out walking when I got a call from Carol,
saying that Hope wanted me to come to give her mom the Lutheran equivalent of Last Rites.

Shocked, I asked, "Today?" And Carol said, "Yes, as soon as you can".

I looked at my watch and calculated,

"Well, it will take me half an hour to walk home and I've got to change clothes
and it will take me a half an hour to get there, so I think I can be there by three.

I called Jeanette to let her know and she said she'd call Hope.

I pulled up outside their house at exactly 3:00 and went in and Grace wasn't awake.
Hope said that they had called Jeanette and she was on her way, and that Frank's brother was on his way
and Grace's sister was on her way and that I could lead the prayers when they had all arrived.
So I spoke with Carol and with Hope and with the caregiver Hillary.
Hillary told me that that morning Grace had told her that she had seen mountains
and a mansion that Frank was building for her and it had seven rooms and it was beautiful.
Jeanette got there about 5 minutes after I did, went in & immediately started singing to Grace.
Hope and Carol and Hillary and I joined Jeanette around Grace's bed and Jeanette kept singing
as I waited for the brother and sister to come so that I could lead the prayers for the dying.
And then all of a sudden Jeanette started nodding at me like I was supposed to do something
and I was thinking that it wasn't time yet, but she kept nodding so I began the prayers.
They only take two or three minutes and when I was finished someone asked, "What time did she die?"
And someone said, "3:15, I think". And Hope said, "Of course! That's when teachers get out of school."

And then Hillary told us the story of how she had ended up at Grace's.
She had another job lined up but it fell through at the last moment and she was in a car, driving, and she was praying,
and she was saying, "God, I needed that job! Why did you let it fall through? What are you doing to me?"
And as she was praying her phone rang & she was asked to take a 7-day position with Grace.
She said she knew right then it was a God assignment.
So as she cared for Grace, she read scripture to Grace, and she prayed with Grace.
She said she had been praying for Grace's healing for a few days until about the 3rd day when Grace said,
"There are many kinds of healing & what you're praying for isn't the healing I want."
And so they began to pray for Grace to be released from this life and join Frank in heaven.
Remember that we planned the funeral with Grace on Tuesday. Grace died on Wednesday.
And after she died, Jeanette said, "I just remembered what I said! That it was to be a tribute to Frank AND Grace –
but I had no idea that it would be a double funeral when I said it!"

The morning of the funeral I got on the 6:30 prayer call, and the leader said, "My theme this morning is grief.
I want us to do a round robin & everyone is invited to lift up those who are grieving."
Her theme could have been anything under the sun, but the day of the Dukenski funeral the theme was grief.
And so of course I told them about Frank and Grace whom they had prayed for before,
and we prayed for Hope and the twins and their family and friends and church family.
Those are just the God sightings that I can remember, but I think there were a whole lot more.
In that whole situation God was present, because everybody there was living in abundant life, even in the midst of death.

The God that we serve is an amazing God!
The God that we serve created this entire universe, every subatomic particle, every cell that makes you you.
We serve an amazingly powerful God and an incredibly loving God –
a God who cares enough to show up in little things like a song on the radio
or a prediction that's uttered that one doesn't even know is a prediction,
or a job falling through so that the person can be sent to one who needs them more.

I am so glad that I learned about this door that we can find by faith,
and this doorway we can walk through by faith, and this land of abundant life we can live in by faith.
I am so glad for all the times that God shows up in my life in ways that I notice nearly every day.
Even when I don't notice, God is still at work.

In the darkest valley God is at work, when enemies threaten to attack God prepares a banquet for me in front of them,
when we get off the path, God's staff and rod pull us back onto it, when we are hungry, God feeds us,
when we are thirsty, God gives us water to drink, when our souls are weary, God restores them.

And God doesn't just wait for us to follow – God pursues us with goodness and mercy all the days of our lives.
The psalmist says he will dwell in the house of the Lord forever, which is actually the same thing that Jesus is saying
when he invites us through the door into the land of Abundant Life.

I want to live in that land of abundant life forever, because once you've been there, you never, ever want to leave.

So believe – have faith – find the door – open it – and step in to a whole new world, a whole new life –
a life that's richer, fuller, deeper & broader, a life that's more vivid, more vibrant, more exciting & more adventurous,
a life that's more meaningful, more purposeful, more rewarding and more fulfilling,
a life filled with signs and wonders, with mystery and magic and miracles.

Go through the Door and step into Life Abundant. Amen