

“Action Precedes Motivation”

Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12 & 1 John 4:19

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Prayer for Understanding Beloved God, Through the pages of scripture, you have sprinkled your love for us like an echoed refrain. Despite its repeated truth, we too often allow that good news to barely touch us. As we read your Word aloud, let the truth of your love for creation seep into our bones. May we hear your echoes of “beloved” deep within us and respond with overflowing joy. We are here. We are listening. Amen.

Action precedes motivation. A few weeks ago, it was a grey day, about 30 minutes before sunset, I was cold and lethargic. I wanted to wrap up in a blanket, lay on the couch, binge watching TV and go to bed early. I rationalized that if I go for a walk, it will be dark soon so I will need the reflective vest. That’s too much effort. And besides, I wouldn’t see much. It is windy, so it will be cold. I have no energy. Not walking one day wouldn’t hurt me. I sighed and said to myself, “I should go for a walk.” That word “should” immediately got my attention. My counselor has instructed me to write down every negative thought daily, to identify my cognitive distortions and write rational responses. Should statements are my primary struggle. With should statements I try to motivate myself as if I need to be whipped and punished before I can be expected to do anything. The consequence is guilt.

Action precedes motivation. I resolved to walk for just 20 minutes and then I would curl up in a blanket on the couch and binge watch TV. On my walk, I was filled with awe by a spectacular sunset and marvelous Christmas lights. I got into my audio book. I walked for an hour which seemed like only a few minutes. The action of going for a walk motivated me to get a couple of hours of ministry work done and a house project. Then, I curled up in blanket on the couch for one episode and got into bed feeling great about all I accomplished and the marvelous Christmas lights. My last thought before sleep was awe from God smiling and shining upon me through the dazzling colors of the sunset.

An epiphany from Epiphany is action precedes motivation. The prophet Isaiah tells how people will first arise and then see God’s light; seek the light and then see radiance; look and then there will be reunion; come home and then thrill with joy; give and then be transformed by worship.

Isaiah 60:1-6 NLT “Arise, Jerusalem! Let your light shine for all to see. For the glory of the Lord rises to shine on you. Darkness as black as night covers all the nations of the earth, but the glory of the Lord rises and appears over you. All nations will come to your light; mighty kings will come to see your radiance. “Look and see, for everyone is coming home! Your sons are coming from distant lands; your little daughters will be carried home. Your eyes will shine and your heart will thrill with joy, for merchants from around the world will come to you. They will bring you the wealth of many lands. Vast caravans of camels will converge on you, the camels of Midian and Ephah. The people of Sheba will bring gold and frankincense and will come worshipping the Lord.”

Russ Roberts describes how action is a necessity to deal with one’s rationalizing mind. Russ tells how there were a couple of flights of stairs to his new flat. The day he moved in he made it a rule that he would take the stairs for daily exercise. Without the stairs rule, he knew his mind would rationalize all kinds of excuses. I am tired. I have too many groceries. It will take too long. My knee is sore. My shoes are wearing out. I will break a sweat. His solution was to make a rule to climb the steps every day.

I have made it a rule of life, a discipline, to walk everyday so I will not get bogged down in rationalization, negative thoughts, cognitive distortions, and guilt. The only exceptions are I can substitute a bike ride or a swim for a walk. At least once a week, one of my walks will be a saunter. John Muir confessed he never liked to hike. Instead, he enjoys sauntering, being aware of one’s surroundings, using all one’s senses to perceive, opening self up to awe.

David Burns in *Feeling Good* writes: “Don’t put the cart before the horse. You have to prime the pump. Then you will begin to get motivated and the fluids will flow spontaneously. You foolishly wait until you feel in the mood to do something. Since you don’t feel like doing it, you automatically put it off. Your error is your

belief that motivation comes first, and then leads to activation and success. It is the other way around. Action must come first and motivation comes later. When someone suggests you do something, you whine, 'I don't feel like it.' Well, who said you were supposed to feel like it? If you wait until you are 'in the mood' you may wait forever! Action leads to motivation, which leads to more action in an increasing spiral." David recommends whenever one is struggling to do something, give it 3 minutes. Just do 3 minutes of whatever you want to accomplish and you will almost always do much more and feel better. Do you have a New Year's resolution? Do you have goals, hopes, and dreams for this year? Identify the simplest action. Resolve to do that action today. Keep doing actions and you will likely become motivated and make the world a more loving place.

Cognitive Behavior Therapy has been life transforming for me. Taking action. Writing down my negative thoughts. Identifying the distortion. Writing a rational response. Taking action to get motivated. Taking action by doing something instead of getting paralyzed under the mountain of fear, hate, violence, oppression, and mess of the world. Since I have been living these disciplines, I see them in scripture.

Scripture tells of royal astrologers who were seeking a more loving life for their communities. They began with actions, seeking, observing the stars, traveling to see Jesus, giving gifts, worshipping God, then they were filled with joy, then they returned home motivated to create a loving community.

Matthew 2:1-12 NLT "Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some royal astrologers from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him." King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this, as was everyone in Jerusalem. Herod called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law and asked, "Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?" "In Bethlehem in Judea," they said, "for this is what the prophet wrote: 'And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah, are not least among the ruling cities of Judah, for a ruler will come from you who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.'" Then Herod called for a private meeting with the royal astrologers and he learned from them the time when the star first appeared. Then Herod told them, "Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him, too!" After this interview the royal astrologers went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy! They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped Jesus. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave Jesus gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. When it was time to leave, they returned to their own country by another route, for God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod."

Action precedes motivation. Scripture declares: **1 John 4:19** "We love because God first loved us."

In his book, *Life of the Beloved*, Henri Nouwen states: "I must tell you that claiming your own blessedness always leads to a deep desire to bless others...It is remarkable how easy it is to bless others, to speak good things to and about them, to call forth their beauty and truth, when you yourself are in touch with your own blessedness. The blessed one always blesses." My epiphany for this year is to be grateful for my blessings and bless others through my actions. My actions will increase my motivation, leading to more action, creating a more loving world.

Recently, I learned how a group was horrifically oppressed. Initially, a wide range of negative emotions raged through me. I could have easily gone down a path of denial, bitterness, anger, justification, rationalization, apathy, shame, guilt, blame, and all sorts of destructive avenues. Instead, I vented to a friend. Got perspective. Examined my thoughts for accuracy. Imagined what would the most excellent way of love be like for this situation. Then, I identified one small action I could do to bring more love into the situation. I did that action. Now, I am motivated to do more.

My epiphany for 2024 is to take action. I am aware of numerous critical issues that need action. I am anticipating an election year filled with ugly politics with plenty of blame and fear mongering. I will strive to be grateful for my blessings and bless others by taking action.

St. Augustine said that the sacraments are visible signs of what scripture proclaims God's redeeming grace freely offered to all people. The sacraments are actions that motivate us to love. Grace is action, forgiving, healing, transforming, loving, glorifying. Quantum physics keeps discovering that all matter is moving, constantly taking action. And all matter relates to all other matter. God designed us for action to be ever growing in love.

Pastor Isaac Villegas shares what the action of baptism means to him. “God’s grace is as diffuse as the waters, rippling within the cellular life of our world. All of life is graced—every person, every community, every creature. We cannot extract ourselves from water and we cannot separate ourselves from God’s care. To remember our baptism is to recognize, again and again, that we are as reliant on grace as our bodies are on water.”

We take action, gathering around tables, to share meals, to motivate us to love all people. We take action, giving thanks, the Greek word is Eucharist. We take action, partaking of the supreme love feast, the Greek word is Agape. We take action, seeking communion with God and all people. We take action, partaking of the Lord’s Supper, the bread of life and the cup of salvation.

The sacraments are action mysteries in which we receive God’s grace and are motivated to be gracious to our self and all people. The sacraments are actions in which we seek Jesus, receive God’s light, shine with blessings and partner with God in bringing heaven to earth.

“Muscle Memory”

A poem by Sarah Speed

When the world falls apart around me, when the rug is pulled, and the house is on fire,
when all I can do is swallow the cry in my throat,
take me to the table.

Tell me how people have fed each other.

Tell me how they’ve torn the bread with wrinkled hands and children’s hands.

Tell me how they’ve said, This love is for you, as they looked you in the eye.

Then take me to the font.

Float my hands in the pool.

Let me feel weightless.

Tell me to leave my burdens there.

Then take me to the front doors.

Remind me how we throw them open.

Take me to the creaky pews, pews that have held the straightened spines and silent prayers of so many.

Take me to church.

Move me through the rituals.

Tell me why it matters, so that next time, when someone else’s world falls apart,

I will have the muscle memory to share.

Action precedes motivation. God loves you, therefore you are able to love. Savor your blessedness so you will be inspired to bless others. Remember your baptism so you will be motivated to love everyone. Partake of holy communion so you will love to unite the world in glorious, joyful harmony, bringing heaven to earth.
Amen

