



Mount Olive Devotion

The First Week of Christmas (December 28, 2020-January 1, 2021)

Monday

Matthew 2:13-18

¹³ Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” ¹⁴ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.” ¹⁶ When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. ¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: ¹⁸ “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

This horrible account is sometimes read the Sunday after Christmas. It is striking in that it follows immediately after the magi who visited the Holy Family “having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, left for their own country by another road.” This story reminds us of something we often forget as we watch our children’s Christmas programs filled with shepherds in their dads’ bathrobes and children dressed up like donkeys and sheep, that Jesus came into a world that was anything but benign. Jesus, as the newborn king, was a threat to Herod, and as such he had wicked people seeking his life almost as soon as it had begun. This story also reminds us that Jesus comes to us in the midst of real life. Jesus comes to us in the middle of pandemic, social unrest, political turmoil, and all the rest. Jesus comes to us in the midst of cancer, arthritis, aging minds and bodies, and at gravesides. Jesus even comes to us as we die, promising as he did to the thief near him on the Cross, “Truly, today you will be with me in paradise.” Jesus promises to be present always, in good days and in bad, strengthening us in faith and calling us into service in His name.

Prayer

Thank you, Gracious Lord, for coming to us in the messiness and tragedy of life. Thank you for not waiting until our lives are in order to find your way to us. We are ever in need of your presence. Thank you for being near. In your name, we pray. AMEN.

Tuesday

Matthew 12:46-50

⁴⁶ While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. ⁴⁷ Someone told him, “Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.” ⁴⁸ But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” ⁴⁹ And pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my moth-

er and my brothers! ⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

There has been much speculation through the years regarding Jesus’ family. Did he have brothers and sisters? Did he have cousins and aunts and uncles and in-laws? While the scriptures certainly don’t spend much time on this subject, these verses indicate that Jesus did at least have brothers, if nothing else, and there is certainly no reason to believe that he wasn’t part of a larger family. After all, he was fully human, and that generally means being part of an extended family. What these verses also indicate, however, is that for Jesus his *spiritual family* was more dear to him than even his own blood relatives. He called his followers his mother and brothers. We who call ourselves disciples of Jesus are included in this family. Jesus calls us his siblings. We are joint heirs with him of all the riches of the Godhead. We are children of God, and as such, part of the great family of God whose place is assured in God’s heavenly home. We are those who have been given a name which cannot be taken from us: “Beloved of God.” So whatever your family makeup, whether you are part of a large extended family with cousins and aunt and uncles galore, or it’s just you and a few others who bear your family name, know that you are part of the family of Christ. That family is vast, and Christ delights to embrace you as one of his own.

Prayer

We are your disciples, Lord Christ. We are those whom you have called to follow you, and we have followed. Thank you for also calling us brothers and sisters. Thank you for your promise that we are joint heirs with you of all the treasures of faith. Grant us grace to live in faith and hope all the days of our lives. In your name we pray. AMEN.

Wednesday

II Peter 3:8-13

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. ¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed. ¹¹ Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, ¹² waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? ¹³ But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

This passage has been both a comfort and a terror to believers down through the ages. Verse 9 reminds us that it is not the Lord’s will that any perish, but that all come to repentance. This is so important to realize, and it is in perfect accord with all that we know about Jesus. Jesus condemned

no one; his sternest rebukes were reserved for religious leaders whose hypocrisy and cruelty continued in spite of his appeals to them. Others, whether they were prostitutes, cheats, liars, traitors, or whatever, he all dealt with with grace and compassion. It is entirely consistent with Christ's example that God does not want any to perish. But Peter also reminds us that the day of the Lord will come and on that day "everything that is done on [the earth] will be disclosed." As Peter goes on to say, this should spur us on to lead lives of holiness and godliness. Finally, however, we hear the promise of the gospel, as "we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home." God is about making all things new. God is about redemption, making clean things that were dirty, repairing things that were broken, making righteous things that were unrighteous. In the face of this righteous God who wishes to make us righteous, we strive to do all we can to bring this to fruition.

Prayer

God of holiness and godliness, you know how often we fail to live lives that reflect you. We are far from holy in our thoughts, words, and deeds, and though we have confessed our sins often and have striven to do better, we often return to our old habits. Forgive us, Lord. Give us a passion for living a life of love as Jesus did. Give us a heart of compassion. Cast us not aside, but make us anew each day. In Jesus' name we pray. AMEN.

Thursday

John 8:12-19

¹² Again Jesus spoke to [the Pharisees], saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." ¹³ Then the Pharisees said to him, "You are testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is not valid." ¹⁴ Jesus answered, "Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid because I know where I have come from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going." ¹⁵ You judge by human standards; I judge no one. ¹⁶ Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is valid; for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me. ¹⁷ In your law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is valid. ¹⁸ I testify on my own behalf, and the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf." ¹⁹ Then they said to him, "Where is your Father?" Jesus answered, "You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also."

In this passage Jesus calls himself 'the light of the world'. He will refer to this again in chapter 9 when he encounters the man born blind. Here he is struggling with the spiritual blindness of the Pharisees. They are very religious and yet they are blind to who Jesus really is. They find reasons again and again not to believe in Jesus. Because of their spiritual blindness, Jesus tells them that they don't even know God the Father, whom they claim to know intimately. This story is instructive to us who are religious. Being religious is no guarantee of spiritual insight. As we see here, it can be the opposite. We can be so sure that our religion is true that we fail to see the Christ that stands before us. It might just be that we are worshipping a god of our own making, and in so doing we have lost our way. We do well to pray that God would remove any blind spots we have so that we may always know Christ clearly. To know Christ clearly is the way of life and joy.

Prayer

Loving God, keep us from spiritual blindness. Keep us from a haughty spirituality that draws us away from you. Guard us from rejoicing in our own religion rather than in the Spirit of Christ within and among us. In the name of Christ we pray. AMEN.

Friday

James 3:13-18

¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. ¹⁵ Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. ¹⁶ For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

On this first day of a new year we hear from the writer, James. He reminds us that “the wisdom from above” is not merely the accumulation of knowledge. It is not being smarter than everyone else or getting better grades or piling up academic degrees. No, the wisdom from above is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. The more we look at this definition the more we see how much it resembles St. Paul’s definition of love in First Corinthians 13: “Love is patient and kind, not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.” It turns out that the wisdom from above is shown most clearly in acts of love, not in a display of knowledge. Again St. Paul would remind us: “If I understand all mysteries and all knowledge...but do not have love, I am nothing.” So perhaps a good way to start the New Year would be to consider what kind of wisdom we are exhibiting, and then pray that God would produce in us the wisdom that is from above.

Prayer

As we begin this New Year, Gracious and Sovereign God, we are thankful for your vast and immeasurable wisdom. We are thankful that in wisdom you created this world and you have put within us the ability to care for it. We are thankful that your Holy Spirit, the source of all wisdom, is also granted to us, your children, and as we look forward to the new year, we can ask and you will provide us the wisdom we need. Guide us. Guide those who lead our nation and other nations. Bring peace on earth. In your gracious name, we pray. AMEN.