



Mount Olive Devotion

The Second Week of Christmas (January 4-8, 2021)

Monday

James 4:11-17

¹¹Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, speaks evil against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. ¹²There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbor?

¹³Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money." ¹⁴Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. ¹⁵Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that." ¹⁶As it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. ¹⁷Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.

The book of James is the New Testament version of the Book of Proverbs. It is filled with sound advice on how to live in a godly way. The first paragraph would be a great aspiration for the New Year – to refrain from speaking evil about others. How much less polarized our society would be if we all committed to this, no matter what we receive in return. Jesus, himself, reminded us, "If you only love those who love you, what reward should you receive?" (Matt. 5:46) The second section of James' advice reminds us to have a light hand on our expectations. We are mortals. Every breath is a gift from God. We make plans yes, and we need to, but we best hold those plans lightly. After all, many times God's plans for us are far better than the schemes we have dreamed up. Again, this is good advice for the New Year.

Prayer

Almighty and Loving God, thank you for the New Year before us. Help us to enter this New Year with a determination to hold a light hand on all our plans, as well as a strong resolve to treat all people with the respect due children of God. Grant us wisdom. Grant us courage. Grant us peace and joy in this New Year. In your strong name, we pray. AMEN.

Tuesday

Proverbs 22:1-9

A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold.

²The rich and the poor have this in common: the LORD is the maker of them all. ³The clever see danger and hide; but the simple go on, and suffer for it. ⁴The reward for humility and fear of the LORD is riches and honor and life. ⁵Thorns and snares are in the way of the perverse; the cautious will keep far from them. ⁶Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray. ⁷The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is the slave of the lender. ⁸Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of anger will fail. ⁹Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor.

It's interesting how many of the proverbs have to do with money or our relationship with it. The first proverb here tells us that having riches but a bad reputation makes us poor. The second proverb reminds us that riches do not change the fact that we have the same creator as those who are poor. Verse 4 tells us that riches come to those who live humbly and with a healthy regard for God as the One to whom we shall one day give account. Verse 7 is an excellent reminder to those of us who struggle with overspending and getting ourselves into debt. It reminds us that the borrower is controlled by the lender. Anyone who has known excessive credit card debt knows the truth of this proverb all too well. Finally, verse 9 tells us that generosity always leads to blessing. In another proverb we read that one who gives to the poor actually lends to the Lord, and the Lord promises to repay that debt in full. Perhaps at the beginning of this New Year, it would be a good idea to take stock of our finances and see how our relationship with money squares with the wisdom these proverbs are sharing. It might just lead us to some life-giving patterns.

Prayer

Gracious Creator, you have created all things for us to steward and enjoy. While we have sometimes been good and generous stewards of these gifts, at other times we have not been. Where we have been poor stewards, forgive us, and where we have been wise encourage us. Show us life-giving patterns in the realm of money, and help us to be a blessing to others in all of our days. We ask this in the name of Jesus. AMEN.

Wednesday

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶ ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’” ⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Today is the Feast Day of Epiphany which concludes the Christmas season. On this day we always read the story of the magi who came from the East to worship the Christ child. This story, at the beginning of Matthew, bookends the Great Commission at the end of Matthew where we hear Jesus command his disciples to go and “make disciples of all nations.” ‘All nations’ are already present at the announcement of Jesus’ birth in the persons of the magi, and of course, this will only continue as the whole world eventually receives the proclamation of a Savior born for all. Epiphany means manifestation or “a revealing”, and so in the Epiphany season we will read more stories of the ways in which Jesus is being revealed to the world. In this New Year we too live expectantly, ready to see Jesus revealed in our lives.

Prayer

Thank you, Gracious God, for your desire to make yourself known to all nations. Thank you for your Son, Jesus, whose birth reveals your great heart for the world you have created. Grant us faith to see you at work in our lives and hearts, so that we too might reveal your great love to others. In Christ’s name, we pray. AMEN.

Thursday

Exodus 1:22- 2:10

²²Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, “Every boy that is born to the Hebrews^[a] you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live.” **2** Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. ² The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. ³ When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. ⁴ His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him. ⁵ The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. ⁶ When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. “This must be one of the Hebrews’ children,” she said. ⁷ Then his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter, “Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?” ⁸ Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Yes.” So the girl went and called the child’s mother. ⁹ Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages.” So the woman took the child and nursed it. ¹⁰ When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, “because,” she said, “I drew him out of the water.”

This familiar story comes in the second day of the season of Epiphany, and it is a reminder of how much like Moses’ birth was the birth of Jesus. You will remember that King Herod, like Pharaoh, was very threatened by the announcement that a new king would be born in Israel, and he sought to have him killed. Pharaoh, as well, was threatened by the growing strength of the Israelite nation despite his best attempts to make life hard for them. Indeed, we read that his efforts to make their lives “bitter with hard service” only made them stronger and more determined than ever to thrive. It is an irony of history that whenever God’s people have been made to suffer they have grown stronger as a result. It is also a sad irony that whenever God’s people have had a life of ease, they have quickly forgotten their vows to God and been weakened as a result. The Church today is no different. We do not pray for suffering to come to us, but it behooves us to always be vigilant lest our walk with God grow unsteady and our hearts closed to God’s leading.

Prayer

Thank you for sustaining your people in times of struggle, Gracious God. Thank you for rescuing them when they are falling. Give us courage when we struggle. Give us patience and wisdom when roadblocks appear. Work your gracious will in our lives, each day, so that, come what may, we might be found faithful to you. In your precious name we pray. AMEN.

Friday

John 8:39-47

³⁹ [The Pharisees] answered him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did, ⁴⁰ but now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. ⁴¹ You are indeed doing what your father does." They said to him, "We are not illegitimate children; we have one father, God himself." ⁴² Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now I am here. I did not come on my own, but he sent me. ⁴³ Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word. ⁴⁴ You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. ⁴⁵ But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. ⁴⁶ Which of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? ⁴⁷ Whoever is from God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not from God."

This fiery exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees, an ultra-strict group of powerful Jewish men, comes on the heels of the confrontation Jesus had with these men around the stoning of a woman caught in adultery. You can read this story at the beginning of chapter 8. These men brought a woman before them whom they claimed had been caught "in the very act of committing adultery." They, of course, had nothing to say about the man who was involved. They reminded Jesus that the Law of Moses required that the woman be stoned. Jesus' response was one that has echoed down through the ages: "Let anyone among you who is without sin cast the first stone." In this exchange Jesus reveals to these men their judgmental, unforgiving, self-righteous, and hypocritical ways. They are unmoved. They counter his every argument with one of their own, finally calling upon their identity as children of Abraham. Jesus reminds them that if they were truly children of Abraham they would not be the murderers and liars that the evidence shows them to be. In our day and age we also have those who call themselves Christians whose lives betray their true identity. Can we know someone's heart? No, we cannot, but a person's life does not lie. As Jesus said, "By their fruits you shall know them." We do well to beware of so-called Christian leaders whose words and actions do not bear any resemblance to the words and actions of Jesus.

Prayer

All-wise and Loving God, we thank you for compassionate and wise leaders of your people. We thank you that despite our foibles, you call forth leaders who lead your Church with integrity and grace. Root out from your Church counterfeit leaders who lead your people into wickedness and oppression. Have mercy on your people. In the Name of Christ, we pray. AMEN.