



## Mount Olive Devotions by Pastor Glenn Monson

The Fourth Week After Epiphany (January 31 – February 4, 2022)

### Monday

Acts 10:44-48

<sup>44</sup> While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. <sup>45</sup> The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, <sup>46</sup> for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, <sup>47</sup> “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” <sup>48</sup> So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

This passage is at the end of the wonderful story of Cornelius, the Roman centurion, who received a vision from God regarding a visitor named Simon Peter who had something to share with him. If you have not read this amazing story, it is well worth the read. In any case, at the end of this story, when it became clear to Peter the disciple and his cohort that the Spirit had been given to Cornelius and his household as surely as it had been given to them, we read that “the circumcised believers (i.e. Jews) who had come with Peter *were astounded* that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.” The Greek word for ‘astounded’ is defined as “the feeling of astonishment mingled with fear, caused by events which are miraculous, extraordinary, or difficult to understand.” In this case, perhaps the latter circumstance is most appropriate. The early believers were all Jews, of course, and as such, they assumed that as others became followers of Christ, they too would come from the Jewish fold. In other words, they would be people like them. This seems to be an affliction we are prone to yet today. When we think of those whom we are most likely to invite to worship or to a Bible study or to some other event of spiritual formation, we probably think in terms of people like ourselves. How freeing it is to realize that God has no such parameters. God invites all. Maybe we should follow that lead.

### Prayer

Forgive us, Lord, for being astonished that people unlike us might believe and be baptized. Forgive us for our narrow thinking. Forgive us for our blind eyes, and our deaf ears to those who differ from us. Give us generous spirits, full of wonder at whom you will draw to yourself next. In your holy name, we pray. AMEN.

## Tuesday

II Chronicles 35:20-24

<sup>20</sup> After all this, when Josiah had set the temple in order, King Neco of Egypt went up to fight at Carchemish on the Euphrates, and Josiah went out against him. <sup>21</sup> But Neco sent envoys to him, saying, "What have I to do with you, king of Judah? I am not coming against you today, but against the house with which I am at war; and God has commanded me to hurry. Cease opposing God, who is with me, so that he will not destroy you." <sup>22</sup> But Josiah would not turn away from him, but disguised himself in order to fight with him. He did not listen to the words of Neco from the mouth of God, but joined battle in the plain of Megiddo. <sup>23</sup> The archers shot King Josiah; and the king said to his servants, "Take me away, for I am badly wounded." <sup>24</sup> So his servants took him out of the chariot and carried him in his second chariot and brought him to Jerusalem. There he died, and was buried in the tombs of his ancestors. All Judah and Jerusalem mourned for Josiah.

This little-known account of the death of Josiah – one of Judah’s faithful, righteous kings – has an important lesson in it. King Neco of Egypt reports to Josiah that he has received a word from God that he is to be granted safe passage through Judah on his way to fight at Carchemish. He tells Josiah straight out that his quarrel is not with him and if he opposes him, he will be opposing God. Josiah refuses to heed this word, is wounded, and dies as a result. By this story, we see, once again, as in yesterday’s passage from Acts 10, that God is very capable of speaking to and working through those who are not from our tribe. When we think about it we realize how ridiculous it is to believe that God only speaks to and works with those like us; yet often, that is what we do. Not too many years ago (2012), Christian author and theologian, Brian McLaren, wrote a book entitled *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?* In this book, McLaren argued that being a strong Christian isn’t fulfilled by us strong-arming someone into believing in Jesus, or into believing as we do, but rather by us showing “vigorous hospitality toward, interest in, and collaboration with ‘the other’.” Who knows, God might actually speak through ‘the other’ to us! Now wouldn’t that be interesting.

## Prayer

Speak to us, Gentle Lord, through the words of our neighbors. Speak to us in ways that we can hear, so that we will learn that you speak many languages, and through many voices. Grant us open ears and open hearts to hear from those least like us, so that your will – that *all* be delivered from sin and death – might come on earth as in heaven. In your precious name, we pray. AMEN.

## **Wednesday**

Acts 19:1-7

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. <sup>2</sup> He said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” They replied, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” <sup>3</sup> Then he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They answered, “Into John’s baptism.” <sup>4</sup> Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.” <sup>5</sup> On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. <sup>6</sup> When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied— <sup>7</sup> altogether there were about twelve of them.

This passage has often confused readers because it seems to suggest there are two baptisms necessary for ‘real’ conversion. Indeed some traditions have adopted this practice, although most churches have not. What this story lifts up is the fact that different followers of Jesus have different understandings and different experiences of what conversion is. Some experience a quiet, inner peace upon receiving the gift of faith while others literally jump for joy in ecstatic celebration at receiving this gift. Some understand faith as primarily a journey of the mind, while for others it is a journey of the heart. Some feel the practice of faith is best expressed through lives of service, while others need to express their faith in worship and praise. Some believers insist that sharing the good news through preaching and song is the only way to evangelize, while others let their lives do the talking. The fact is, there is great variety in how faith in Christ is expressed in people’s lives, and it is likely that any practice, done in love for God and neighbor, is acceptable to God. So be at peace, for God is with you.

## **Prayer**

We praise you, Gracious God, for accepting our meager acts of faithfulness in whatever shape they manifest themselves. Forgive us for judging those whose practices differ from ours. Give us your generous heart. Humble us with your merciful example, and lead us in the way of life. In the name of Jesus, we pray. AMEN.

## Thursday

John 1:43-49

<sup>43</sup>The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." <sup>44</sup>Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. <sup>45</sup>Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." <sup>46</sup>Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." <sup>47</sup>When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" <sup>48</sup>Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." <sup>49</sup>Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

I love Jesus' response to Nathanael's snarky attitude: "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." Jesus could have called Nathanael out. He could have said to him, "What do you mean by saying, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' You have insulted me and my hometown." Instead Jesus interprets his attitude generously, claiming that Nathanael is simply a person who tells it like it is. I wonder how we might learn from Jesus here. Perhaps you know someone who finds it easy to criticize others or, it seems, most everything. Maybe you could say, "Here is truly a person with an eye for detail." Or perhaps you know someone who is disorganized or kind of messy. Maybe you could say, "Here is truly someone who spends little time trying to impress others." There is always a way to describe another person's actions that lifts them up, rather than belittles them. And isn't that how we hope other people will interpret *our* quirks and bad habits? As Luther said in his *Small Catechism*, when answering the question of the meaning of the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment: "We are to fear and love God, so that we do not betray, slander, or lie about our neighbor, but defend them, speak well of them, and explain their actions in the kindest way."

## Prayer

Forgive us, Almighty God, for not having the mind of Christ when describing the actions of others. Forgive us for being willing to believe the lie that when we tear others down, we lift ourselves up. Grant us a fresh spirit of humility, O God, and lead us in the way of mercy and peace. In your gracious name, we pray. AMEN.

## Friday

Psalm 56:1-4, 8-11

<sup>1</sup> Be gracious to me, O God, for people trample on me; all day long foes oppress me;

<sup>2</sup> my enemies trample on me all day long, for many fight against me.

O Most High, <sup>3</sup> when I am afraid, I put my trust in you.

<sup>4</sup> In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I am not afraid; what can flesh do to me?

<sup>8</sup> You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your record?

<sup>9</sup> Then my enemies will retreat in the day when I call. This I know, that God is for me.

<sup>10</sup> In God, whose word I praise, in the LORD, whose word I praise,

<sup>11</sup> in God I trust; I am not afraid. What can a mere mortal do to me?

The Psalmist, King David, is an example for us here. David says that two things sustain him in the day of trouble: God's Word, and prayer. In verse 4 David testifies to his trust in God's Word, and in verse 9, he testifies to God's sure answer to prayer "in the day when I call." In both cases, David ends with the phrase, "What can flesh, or a mere mortal do to me, if I trust in God?" When we are assailed by enemies from within or without, by voices that oppress us or call our worth into question, we too can turn to God's Word and prayer. There are scores of verses that declare God's love for us. Setting one or two of them to memory and making them a prayer mantra of ours is one way of fighting off these enemies. Several verses that have been found helpful to generations of believers are Psalm 23:1, "The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want," or I Peter 5:7, "Cast all your anxieties on God, for he cares about you." Find your own favorite verse and carry it with you in your heart in the day of trouble. Then you too will be able to say, with David, "In God I trust; I am not afraid. What can a mere mortal do to me?"

## Prayer

We are in your hands, Gracious God. We are with you from the rising of the sun to its setting, from our first day to our last. You have promised us eternal life, and a love that is beyond measure. Give us faith to believe your good promises and to live in joy all our days. In the Name of Christ, we pray. AMEN.