



Mount Olive Devotion

The Fifth Week After Epiphany (February 8-12, 2021)

Monday

Psalm 147:1-6

¹ Praise the LORD! How good it is to sing praises to our God; for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting. ² The LORD builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcasts of Israel. ³ He heals the broken-hearted, and binds up their wounds. ⁴ He determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names. ⁵ Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure. ⁶ The LORD lifts up the downtrodden; he casts the wicked to the ground.

Here the psalmist says an amazing thing: “God determines the number of the stars and gives to all of them their names.” If you have any knowledge of astronomy you know what an audacious claim this is. First of all, we understand there are billions and billions of stars – probably finally uncountable. And then to claim that God not only numbers them, but has a name for each one? Wow! I just imagine God lining all the stars up and saying, “I think you shall be named Rachel, and you Juanita, and you Amad...” and so on. What is going on here? It is clear that the psalmist is claiming both the incredible vastness of God’s power, as well as God’s ability to know each part of the creation intimately. That is true with us as well. Yes, there are now billions of people on earth, and billions who have died and billions that are yet to be born, and yet God knows us, *each by name*. We are precious to God. We are, each of us, a unique, loved child of God. That, by itself, is mind-boggling. That is also good news.

Prayer

How we praise you, O God, for your vast power and your even more mind-boggling love of us all. You have made the creation and all that is in it, and yet in all its vastness you know each part intimately as a parent does a child. How we praise you for this great power and love. Grant us grace to remain ever near you and ever confident of your love and power. In the name of Christ our Lord, we pray. AMEN.

Tuesday

Job 36:1, 5-12

Elihu continued and said: ⁵“Surely God is mighty and does not despise any; he is mighty in strength of understanding. ⁶He does not keep the wicked alive, but gives the afflicted their right.

⁷He does not withdraw his eyes from the righteous, but with kings on the throne he sets them forever, and they are exalted. ⁸And if they are bound in fetters and caught in the cords of affliction,

⁹then he declares to them their work and their transgressions, that they are behaving arrogantly.

¹⁰He opens their ears to instruction, and commands that they return from iniquity. ¹¹If they listen, and serve him, they complete their days in prosperity, and their years in pleasantness. ¹²But if they do not listen, they shall perish by the sword, and die without knowledge.

In this passage, one of Job’s friends, Elihu, tries to make the case that if Job was truly righteous he wouldn’t be suffering. Elihu argues here that God “does not keep the wicked alive, but gives the afflicted their right.” What Elihu is trying to do is prove that suffering and sin are directly related. If we suffer, so the argument goes, it is because we have sinned. Simple. If we are *not* suffering, it is because we have *not* sinned. We all know the half-truth of this. Certainly it is true that our sins or our poor choices can bring suffering to us. If we run a red light, we might well be in an accident. If we shoplift, we might go to jail. Similarly if we constantly spend more than we make, we will eventually go broke, and so on. But what is also clear is that not *all* suffering is related to sins or poor choices. Indeed, there is much suffering that comes to us and to others for which there seems no answer. Good people get cancer. Brilliant scientists get dementia. Wonderful athletes are injured in unforeseen accidents. Our hope in suffering is *not* that we will someday find out the reason why it is has come to us, but rather to know who it is that shall walk with us in our suffering. That one is Jesus.

Prayer

Jesus, you are the Righteous One who suffered. You are the young man who died at the hands of a mob and a corrupt state. You are the one who endured all things for the love of the world. We thank and praise you for your great sacrifice, and your great love. Grant us faith to follow you in lives of faithfulness and praise. In your name, we pray. AMEN.

Wednesday

Matthew 12:9-14

⁹ [Jesus] left that place and entered their synagogue; ¹⁰ a man was there with a withered hand, and they asked him, “Is it lawful to cure on the sabbath?” so that they might accuse him. ¹¹ He said to them, “Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? ¹² How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath.” ¹³ Then he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and it was restored, as sound as the other. ¹⁴ But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.

This story is a vivid story about the difference between a religion of duty and one of love. Note the question these Pharisees posed to Jesus: “Is it lawful to cure on the Sabbath?” They clearly believe the correct answer to be, “No, it is not.” In their view, God is a God of rules and boundaries and dos and don’ts. Jesus, it is clear, does not have this view of God. Not only does he announce that it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath, but he goes ahead and does it, out of compassion. He restores the hand of this poor man, and I’m sure, sends him on his way rejoicing. Jesus is announcing that God is a God of love not rules and boundaries. This is so important for us all to have straight. Whenever we wonder what is right to do in any situation, we do well to ask, “What is loving? Which action proclaims love – even if it is ‘tough’ love?” Asking *that* question will keep us from falling into the pit of lovelessness and indifference that characterized the Pharisees – a place that will eventually put us at odds with Jesus.

Prayer

How we thank you, Lord Jesus, for your way of love. You grant us freedom to live in love, not according to an endless list of dos and don’ts. Thank you. Thank you. Help us to also live our lives in this way with all we encounter, granting them grace, and loving them in all the ways you lead us. In your precious name, we pray. AMEN.

Thursday

II Kings 4:8-17

⁸ One day Elisha was passing through Shunem, where a wealthy woman lived, who urged him to have a meal. So whenever he passed that way, he would stop there for a meal. ⁹ She said to her husband, "Look, I am sure that this man who regularly passes our way is a holy man of God. ¹⁰ Let us make a small roof chamber with walls, and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp, so that he can stay there whenever he comes to us." ¹¹ One day when he came there, he went up to the chamber and lay down there. ¹² He said to his servant Gehazi, "Call the Shunammite woman." When he had called her, she stood before him. ¹³ He said to him, "Say to her, Since you have taken all this trouble for us, what may be done for you? Would you have a word spoken on your behalf to the king or to the commander of the army?" She answered, "I live among my own people." ¹⁴ He said, "What then may be done for her?" Gehazi answered, "Well, she has no son, and her husband is old." ¹⁵ He said, "Call her." When he had called her, she stood at the door. ¹⁶ He said, "At this season, in due time, you shall embrace a son." She replied, "No, my lord, O man of God; do not deceive your servant." ¹⁷ The woman conceived and bore a son at that season, in due time, as Elisha had declared to her.

The story of the Shunammite woman is an unusual one in that the woman in the story is wealthy. It is not often that we hear stories of wealthy individuals of faith, even though there are some. (e.g. Queen Esther, the Roman centurion whose servant Jesus healed). Throughout the Bible we are warned about the pitfalls of wealth, in regards to faith. In the book of Proverbs, we hear this prayer: "Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that I need, or I shall be full, and deny you, and say, 'Who is the Lord?' or I shall be poor, and steal, and profane the name of my God." (Prov. 30:8b-9). Both poverty and riches have their pitfalls, but wealth, the writer warns us, can tempt us to forget that we are not the Lord of creation. Jesus, too, reminds us that "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." St. Paul, as well, says, that "the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs." (II Tim. 6:10). The Shunammite woman, however, was apparently spared from such a fate. Her wealth was no barrier to her faith or faithfulness. We who are affluent do well to be attentive to the ways that wealth and faith are intertwined, praying to God that we might be found faithful.

Prayer

God of all Creation, remind us daily that you are the Lord. You have made us and given us all things for our enjoyment. Remind us too that as we live from your abundance, we are called to share that abundance with others. In Jesus' name, we pray. AMEN.

Friday

Mark 3:7-12

⁷ Jesus departed with his disciples to the sea, and a great multitude from Galilee followed him; ⁸ hearing all that he was doing, they came to him in great numbers from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, beyond the Jordan, and the region around Tyre and Sidon. ⁹ He told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, so that they would not crush him; ¹⁰ for he had cured many, so that all who had diseases pressed upon him to touch him. ¹¹ Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted, "You are the Son of God!" ¹² But he sternly ordered them not to make him known.

In the book of Mark, Jesus is repeatedly telling those around him not to tell others about his true identity. This pattern in Mark's gospel has come to be known as the Messianic Secret, and a number of theories have been set forth as to why Jesus did this. Some have thought it a matter of timing: i.e. Jesus didn't want his true identity known until the events of the Passion had taken place. Others have thought that he was trying to tamp down the "celebrity status" he was gaining, lest his followers think that was truly his reason for appearing. Still others have thought that perhaps Jesus was merely protecting himself from the powerful people who would be out to destroy anyone claiming to be divine. No matter what theory we take, it is clear that Jesus' attempt to keep his true identity a secret failed. Even in Mark's gospel, as Jesus died, we hear the centurion standing near the Cross say, "Truly this was God's Son!" Maybe what Mark was doing was making it clear that even *Jesus* could not keep the Gospel from being proclaimed: "This is God's Son! Look! This is the Savior of the World!"

Prayer

We praise you, Jesus, Son of God, born of a woman, conceived by the Holy Spirit, true Man and true God. We praise you that your identity cannot be kept a secret. You are the Savior of the World. You are the Holy One of God. You are the Risen One, who walks with us all our days. And finally, you are the Righteous Judge who will cover all our sins with your grace, and usher us into your kingdom forever. We praise you, Holy One of God, our Savior. AMEN.