



## Mount Olive Devotion

The First Week After Epiphany (January 11-15, 2021)

### Monday

Acts 9:10-19a

<sup>10</sup> Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” He answered, “Here I am, Lord.” <sup>11</sup> The Lord said to him, “Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, <sup>12</sup> and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.” <sup>13</sup> But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; <sup>14</sup> and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.” <sup>15</sup> But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; <sup>16</sup> I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” <sup>17</sup> So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” <sup>18</sup> And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, <sup>19</sup> and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

This story from the Book of Acts is not a story that receives a lot of acclaim. Rather, what precedes it, the conversion of St. Paul on the road to Damascus, gets all the headlines. The fact remains that Ananias is the hero in this story. If it wasn't for Ananias, Saul – soon to be known as Paul – would have never been accepted into the community of believers. If it hadn't been for Ananias' bold faith in God's command, Paul's wholly unlikely conversion from terrorizer of believers to evangelist for Christ might never have been known. What this story teaches us is that “little people” sometimes play enormous roles in the life of the world. A simple act of kindness inspires a person to start a charity that provides clean water to millions. An act of compassion enables a homeless youth to become a champion for affordable housing. These are stories we have heard, and yet we forget the Ananiases in the story. We are called to be an Ananias in the world. That simply means that when we are called to bless someone, even someone we may not like, that is what we must do. That blessing may just change the world.

### Prayer

Give us confidence in your call to us, Almighty God. Give us faith in your compassionate Spirit that wills that all the world come under your gentle reign of love and unity. Give us boldness to bless others, no matter their appearance or creed, their ethnicity or status, and let us do it in the name of Christ, in whose name we pray. AMEN.

## Tuesday

I Samuel 16:1, 6-13

The LORD said to Samuel, “How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.” <sup>6</sup> When [Jesse and his sons] came, he looked on Eliab and thought, “Surely the LORD’s anointed is now before the LORD.” <sup>7</sup> But the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.” <sup>8</sup> Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, “Neither has the LORD chosen this one.” <sup>9</sup> Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, “Neither has the LORD chosen this one.” <sup>10</sup> Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, “The LORD has not chosen any of these.” <sup>11</sup> Samuel said to Jesse, “Are all your sons here?” And he said, “There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.” And Samuel said to Jesse, “Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.” <sup>12</sup> He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The LORD said, “Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.” <sup>13</sup> Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward.

In this familiar story, the key verse is verse 7: “For the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” How instructive this is. It’s true that we often are seduced by mere appearances. We see a man who is “tall, dark, and handsome” and think, “He’s the one.” Or we see a woman who is a delight to the eyes and again we think, “She’s the one.” God, however, looks on the heart. That is to say, God looks on those unseen qualities within a person that control their motivations, their desires, and their needs. Those qualities, of course, will ultimately answer the question of whether or not this person is really “the one.” C.T. Studd, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Christian missionary, once quipped, “God only wants the heart; any old turnip will do for a head.” What he was saying is that when God calls someone to service it is their love of God and of neighbor that finally matters most. When we give ourselves into God’s service we do not need to fear that we do not have what it takes to do the job. Again, as a wise person once said, “The one whom God calls, God equips.”

## Prayer

We thank you, God, that you choose those whom the world overlooks. We thank you that you even use us to do your work. Equip us for your service, we pray, and give us courage to follow. In Jesus’ name, we pray. AMEN.

## **Wednesday**

I Kings 2:1-4, 10-12

When David's time to die drew near, he charged his son Solomon, saying: <sup>2</sup> "I am about to go the way of all the earth. Be strong, be courageous, <sup>3</sup> and keep the charge of the LORD your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes, his commandments, his ordinances, and his testimonies, as it is written in the law of Moses, so that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn. <sup>4</sup> Then the LORD will establish his word that he spoke concerning me: 'If your heirs take heed to their way, to walk before me in faithfulness with all their heart and with all their soul, there shall not fail you a successor on the throne of Israel.' <sup>10</sup> Then David slept with his ancestors, and was buried in the city of David. <sup>11</sup> The time that David reigned over Israel was forty years; he reigned seven years in Hebron, and thirty-three years in Jerusalem. <sup>12</sup> So Solomon sat on the throne of his father David; and his kingdom was firmly established.

The first two commands that the dying King David gives to the young prince, Solomon, are noteworthy: "Be strong, be courageous." The story that is Solomon's will prove the wisdom of these commands. It will take much strength and much courage to continue to walk in the ways of the Lord "with all one's heart and soul". We, in the Lutheran tradition, understand that there are three forces that oppose our desire to be faithful to God. We call them the flesh, the world, and the devil. These are the powers within us, around us, and beyond us that oppose all that God has designed and called us to be. It takes courage and strength to stand against them. Sometimes in a New Year we make resolutions to do better. We resolve to speak more kindly, to be less judgmental, to control our appetites or our anger or whatever it is that is out of control. All of this can be helpful, but we shall need more than mere resolutions to live faithfully. We shall need the strength and courage that only God can provide. We shall need the power of the Holy Spirit.

## **Prayer**

Gracious and loving God, how we need your help in our quest to be faithful. How we need your Holy Spirit every day to empower us in this quest. Grant us, your servants, the strength and courage to live lives of faithfulness, and through us, inspire others in this same way. We pray this in the strong name of Jesus. AMEN.

## Thursday

Genesis 17:1-8

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. <sup>2</sup> And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” <sup>3</sup> Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, <sup>4</sup> “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. <sup>5</sup> No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. <sup>6</sup> I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. <sup>7</sup> I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. <sup>8</sup> And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God.”

This is a delightful story for anyone who wonders if God can use an aging person for God’s purposes. Note how it begins, “When Abram was ninety-nine years old...” That’s not how a lot of hero stories begin. And yet that is what God does. God calls a person who is nearly 100 years old to be a vehicle for blessing to the world! There was recently an article in the paper about Iris Westman, a woman from a small town in North Dakota, who died at the age of 115. Reportedly, she never married, but as a teacher and a librarian, she was a great influence on her many students who were inspired to go into teaching because of her example. She was said to have delighted greatly in hearing from her students, knowing that the work of teaching was held in high esteem. Iris Westman was a woman whom God used to bless the world. Even though she had no biological children, she had professional offspring – people who were inspired by her teaching career. As such, like Abraham, she was the ancestor of a multitude. We must never underestimate God’s ability to use us to bless the world, no matter how old we become.

## Prayer

Thank you, Creating God, for the life you give us. Thank you for long life, lived well, that has inspired others. Thank you for those elderly persons in our lives who continue to be examples of faith, hope, and love amongst us. Help us all to live to bless others. We pray in your holy name. AMEN.

## Friday

John 1:29-34

The next day [John the Baptizer] saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! <sup>30</sup>This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ <sup>31</sup>I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.” <sup>32</sup>And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. <sup>33</sup>I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ <sup>34</sup>And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.”

John the Baptizer was, by all reports, a very confident and fearless man. He famously rebuked the crowds who came to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” (Lk. 3:7). Here, however, we see a different sort of man. Twice John says, “I myself did not know [the Christ].” John states clearly his dependence on the revelation of the Spirit to show him the Christ. Apparently, not until *after* John baptized Jesus, was it revealed to John that this Jesus was the Christ. This story illustrates for us how God does not always show us clearly what is before us, but rather asks us simply to do the thing we are able to do. John was called and able to baptize. He did that willingly. Amidst this simple service, John ended up baptizing the Lamb of God. Perhaps we too are called to simple acts of service that have endings we could never anticipate. It is not important that we do not know everything that lies before us, only that we remain faithful to the tasks we have been given. God will see to everything else in its time.

## Prayer

We confess, Gracious God, that we are anxious to have all our questions answered. We often fail to move out in faith, claiming that the things hidden from us are hindering us, when the truth is, we are afraid. Forgive us, Lord. Help us to trust in your guiding hand and your loving will for our lives. We believe. Help our unbelief. In your precious name, we pray. AMEN.