



Mount Olive Devotion

The Fourth Week After Epiphany (February 1-5, 2021)

Monday

Deuteronomy 3:23-28

At that time, too, I entreated the LORD, saying: ²⁴ “O Lord GOD, you have only begun to show your servant your greatness and your might; what god in heaven or on earth can perform deeds and mighty acts like yours! ²⁵ Let me cross over to see the good land beyond the Jordan, that good hill country and the Lebanon.” ²⁶ But the LORD was angry with me on your account and would not heed me. The LORD said to me, “Enough from you! Never speak to me of this matter again! ²⁷ Go up to the top of Pisgah and look around you to the west, to the north, to the south, and to the east. Look well, for you shall not cross over this Jordan. ²⁸ But charge Joshua, and encourage and strengthen him, because it is he who shall cross over at the head of this people and who shall secure their possession of the land that you will see.”

It must have been heartbreaking for Moses to know that after leading the people of Israel all the way from Egypt to the border of Canaan, the Promised Land, he would not be allowed to enter it with them. Yet, this was God’s decision. There are times in all of our lives when it seems that what we desire and what God allows are not in sync. A promising relationship fails. A business venture flops. An exciting job opportunity evaporates. A dreamed-of retirement is not what we envisioned. These are times when we are compelled to remember that we can’t know for certain what the future will hold, and we need to trust that the doors that are open to us will be just as good or maybe even better than what we had hoped for. Perhaps that promising relationship would have been disastrous. Maybe the business plans we had were way beyond us. Maybe the opportunities we had thought so intriguing will prove to be a poor substitute for what God has in mind. As St. Paul says, “We walk by faith, not by sight.”

Prayer

When our plans do not work out, help us to trust you, O God. When our dreams evaporate into thin air, help us to cling to you, O Solid Rock. You are good. All the time. Give us faith to trust this, every day. In Jesus’ name, we pray. AMEN.

Tuesday

Deuteronomy 12:28-32

²⁸ Be careful to obey all these words that I command you today, so that it may go well with you and with your children after you forever, because you will be doing what is good and right in the sight of the LORD your God. ²⁹ When the LORD your God has cut off before you the nations whom you are about to enter to dispossess them, when you have dispossessed them and live in their land, ³⁰ take care that you are not snared into imitating them, after they have been destroyed before you: do not inquire concerning their gods, saying, “How did these nations worship their gods? I also want to do the same.” ³¹ You must not do the same for the LORD your God, because every abhorrent thing that the LORD hates they have done for their gods. They would even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods. ³² You must diligently observe everything that I command you; do not add to it or take anything from it.

These commands of Moses come to the people of Israel as they are about to cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land. God warns them lest they assume that some of the religious practices of the tribes who have occupied the land would be expected of them. Specifically, God assures them that never will child sacrifice be required of them. This passage is a good chance to reflect on our own religious practices. Martin Luther was consistent in reminding us that what is always to be emphasized in worship life is whatever exalts Christ. Does our music exalt Christ? It must, so we do it with gusto! Do our prayers and preaching exalt Christ? They must, and we speak them boldly, believing they do. Does our life together – our lives of service and sacrifice, fellowship and fun – exalt Christ? Again, it must, and whenever it does we are encouraged to do all things with great enthusiasm. As the Westminster Catechism says so well, “[The mortal’s] chief end is to glorify God and enjoy God forever.”

Prayer

We praise you, God of All Life, for allowing us to sing your praises. You are a great God, and a great ruler above all gods. There is none that surpasses you in majesty, wisdom, or grace. We are your grateful servants. Grant that we might walk every day in faithful and joyful service of your Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. AMEN.

Wednesday

Deuteronomy 13:1-4

If prophets or those who divine by dreams appear among you and promise you omens or portents, ² and the omens or the portents declared by them take place, and they say, "Let us follow other gods" (whom you have not known) "and let us serve them," ³ you must not heed the words of those prophets or those who divine by dreams; for the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you indeed love the LORD your God with all your heart and soul. ⁴ The LORD your God you shall follow, him alone you shall fear, his commandments you shall keep, his voice you shall obey, him you shall serve, and to him you shall hold fast.

The people of Israel are assured here that false prophets will arise amongst them who will have great power. They will be able to see the future and predict coming events that actually take place. God knows the seductive power of such things, and warns the people: "[When] they say, 'Let us follow after gods and let us serve them, you must not heed [them]'" These words are wise words to follow even today. Religious charlatans are active in every age. Faith healers, leaders of personality cults, prosperity 'gospel' preachers, and the like, are common in our day and age. They, like the prophets that Moses warned the people about so long ago, have great appeal because they are able to do amazing things. They seem to have great power and thereby often draw a crowd. Beware, says Moses. Beware. As Jesus would say later, they may be angels of darkness, costumed as angels of the light. Thankfully, God's Spirit is living and active, giving us the discernment we need. We pray for discernment.

Prayer

Give to your people discerning minds, O God. Keep us from being seduced by voices that would lead us away from Christ and the ways of love and grace. Fill us with faith and wisdom to heed those voices that draw us to you, and give us courage to say no to the voices that would draw us away. In the Name of Christ, we pray. AMEN.

Thursday

Numbers 22:22-30

God's anger was kindled because [Balaam] was going, and the angel of the LORD took his stand in the road as his adversary. Now he was riding on the donkey, and his two servants were with him. ²³The donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road, with a drawn sword in his hand; so the donkey turned off the road, and went into the field; and Balaam struck the donkey, to turn it back onto the road. ²⁴Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side. ²⁵When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, it scraped against the wall, and scraped Balaam's foot against the wall; so he struck it again. ²⁶Then the angel of the LORD went ahead, and stood in a narrow place, where there was no way to turn either to the right or to the left. ²⁷When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, it lay down under Balaam; and Balaam's anger was kindled, and he struck the donkey with his staff. ²⁸Then the LORD opened the mouth of the

donkey, and it said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" ²⁹Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have made a fool of me! I wish I had a sword in my hand! I would kill you right now!" ³⁰But the donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your donkey, which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I been in the habit of treating you this way?" And he said, "No."

If you never read the entire story of Balaam and the donkey it is worth the time. What a crazy story it is, where God opens the mouth of this animal. In seminary preaching classes it has at times been pointed out that if God can open mouth of a donkey to speak God's word, preachers should not fear that God will use them! As this story goes, once the donkey has spoken to Balaam, his eyes are opened and he finally sees the Lord's angel for himself. Furthermore, he confesses his disobedience and arrogance to God, and gets back on the right path. This story reminds us that God can use just about anything, any situation, and any voice to speak to us, and sometimes the more startling the better. If you have ever been brought face-to-face in an abrupt manner with your own sins of impatience or neglect or unkindness by an unexpected voice, you know what I mean. It is not a pleasant encounter, but sometimes it is the only way our eyes are finally opened.

Prayer

Forgive us, Gracious God, for our willful deafness to your voice. Forgive us for thinking we know better than you as Balaam did. Forgive us for our blindness to your presence in our lives. Bring us to our senses. Help us to see and hear you. Thank you for those who have been your voice, even when we have not welcomed them. In your Son's Name, we pray. AMEN.

Friday

Jeremiah 29:7-14

⁷ But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. ⁸ For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, ⁹ for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the LORD.

¹⁰ For thus says the LORD: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹² Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³ When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴ I will let you find me, says the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

These are words of the prophet Jeremiah to the people of Israel who have found themselves in Babylon. Notice first that the prophet instructs the people to seek the welfare of their captors. He says that their welfare is where they will find their own welfare. He then instructs them not to listen to the voices amongst them who preach a different message, assumedly one that advises them *not* to seek the welfare of their captors. Finally Jeremiah assures them of God's promise that if they trust God, even in this time of captivity, God will bless them and give them "a future with hope." In fact, God promises right here to someday bring them "back to the place from which I sent you into exile." This experience of having to wait and trust in God is one we have all had. This 11th verse has probably been made into more than one wall hanging. God has good plans for us – that is what we are asked to trust. As Jesus said, "I have come that you may have life and have it to the full." Sometimes waiting and trusting is what we are called to.

Prayer

Give us faith, O God. Give us faith in your good plans for us. Keep us from giving up. Keep us from despair because the nights are long and our patience wears thin. Fill us with your Holy Spirit so that, come what may, we might be found trusting in you. In the Name of the Risen Christ, we pray.

AMEN.