



Mount Olive Devotion

Eleventh Week of Pentecost (August 10-14, 2020)

Monday

Psalm 127:1-2

¹ Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.

Unless the LORD guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain.

² It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives sleep to his beloved.

“Eating the bread of anxious toil” is a rich image. It suggests that a person is producing an income by means of work that brings them pain. The word translated ‘anxious toil’ is most often understood as the word for ‘pain’. In older translations, this phrase was sometimes translated ‘the bread of sorrows.’ No matter how we understand it, this phrase describes a person whose work is only a heavy burden, giving no joy, and perhaps producing an insufficient income as well. The psalmist is clear: such toil is ‘in vain’, that is, it is an empty pursuit. We who spend most of our lives in the workplace do well to consider the wisdom of this psalmist. Is our work regularly producing pain in our life? Is our work void of any joy? Does our work fail to give us any sense that we are making a contribution toward the world’s good? If our answer to these questions is yes, it might be time to consider other pursuits, for God gives to God’s beloved sleep.

Prayer

Gracious God, thank you for your concern for us. Thank you that our work is important to you. Thank you that through our gifts we can make a meaningful contribution to the life of the world. Give us courage to make a change if we need to. Encourage us in good work even when it is difficult. In all things, lead us in your way, we pray. In Jesus’ name. AMEN.

Tuesday

Genesis 21:1-7

The LORD dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as he had promised. ² Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. ³ Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. ⁴ And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. ⁵ Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. ⁶ Now Sarah said, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.” ⁷ And she said, “Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.”

This incredible story about an elderly couple having a child is certainly one of the most delightful stories in all of scripture. It is made doubly so when the child is named Isaac, which is a play on the

Hebrew word for 'laugh.' The word can also mean "to jest" or "to toy with" or "to make sport of." This all suggests that it was not only Abraham and Sarah that were laughing at the birth of Isaac, but God as well. One could just imagine God laughing an enormous divine laugh in the heavenly realms, making the cosmos shake with joy. We don't often think of God laughing, but imagine how much fun God had in making the creatures of the earth. Is it possible that God did not laugh when the elephant or the armadillo or the kangaroo was created? Or how about the creation of the blowfish or the hammerhead shark or the spiny anteater? It seems entirely possible that God has had many good laughs, and perhaps is laughing regularly when God's children play and sport about in healthy ways. It might serve us well to consider how we too are blessed to laugh.

Prayer

God of All Creation, we delight in knowing that you are a God of joy. You have made all things and delight in them. You have made us and delight in us. Give us joy in all that you have made. Grant us eyes to see the humor in life, and the grace to share it with others. In your name we pray. AMEN.

Wednesday

Ecclesiastes 10:1-6

Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a foul odor; so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.

² The heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of a fool to the left.

³ Even when fools walk on the road, they lack sense, and show to everyone that they are fools.

⁴ If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your post, for calmness will undo great offenses.

⁵ There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, as great an error as if it proceeded from the ruler: ⁶ folly is set in many high places, and the rich sit in a low place.

The book of Ecclesiastes is written as the reflections of an old king who is sharing his wisdom. Traditionally this is thought to have been Solomon, but the person only identifies himself as "the Teacher." Many of the proverbs lift up the difference between the foolish and the wise. Here we have the image of two people walking on a road. One inclines to the right and the other to the left. In Hebrew wisdom the right hand symbolized strength and wisdom, so to incline to the right meant a person showed him or herself to be wise. The fool inclined to the left, going away from wisdom and strength. The proverbs points out that even by the way people walk on the road they show whether they are foolish or wise. The 'walk' of a person can also refer to their life. If a person's 'walk' or 'way' lacks sense it will eventually be known. Both folly and wisdom have their own rewards. It is good to remember that neither folly nor wisdom is reserved for either the mighty or the lowly; wisdom must be pursued by all.

Prayer

All Wise God, we praise you for your eternal wisdom. We praise you that your wisdom, while far beyond our understanding, comes even to us in some measure. Give us open minds, open hearts, open ears, that we may gain wisdom. Steer us clear of folly, and when we go astray, give us wise counselors to guide us back to the way of wisdom. We pray in your Holy Name. AMEN.

Thursday

Psalm 67

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us,

² that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations.

³ Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.

⁴ Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth.

⁵ Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.

⁶ The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, has blessed us.

⁷ May God continue to bless us; let all the ends of the earth revere him.

Psalm 67 is an unusual psalm in that the writer asks to be blessed *in order that* God's saving power might be known by all people. The psalmist's agenda is clearly not to gain blessings for oneself, but to let God's righteous and blessed ways be known by everyone. We probably don't often think in this way. What was the last time you prayed for blessings in order that God's gracious and generous ways might be made known to others? This posture puts blessings in a different place. They no longer function solely as a way for us to receive comfort and joy, but also so that others might be led in the way of grace and truth. The Hebrew word for "saving power" is Yeshua, a name most familiar to us as Jesus. Perhaps a Christian way of understanding this psalm is to pray for blessings so that the words and ways of Jesus might be known by all. Perhaps our blessings could be a way that others are introduced to the Fount of Many Blessings. Perhaps it is true: we are blessed to be a blessing.

Prayer

You are to be praised, Gracious One. Your wisdom and power are beyond understanding, and your steadfast love is from age to age. The whole creation praises you, and we too, your people, praise you. Bless us, Gracious Lord, that we may be a blessing to others. Bless us, so that through our lives others might come to know the Blessed One, even Jesus Christ, our Lord, in whose name we pray. AMEN.

Friday

John 14:25-31a

“I have said these things to you while I am still with you. ²⁶ But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. ²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. ²⁸ You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. ²⁹ And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe. ³⁰ I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me; ³¹ but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father.

These words from Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer are words that have given comfort to God’s people from the first day they were uttered to the disciples. They assure us that the Holy Spirit is busy helping us to remember what Jesus taught. These words also assure us that the peace of Christ, which as St. Paul said, is “beyond our understanding”, is a gift from God. Finally, Jesus assures us that the ruler of this world has no power over him. He is sovereign. What great promises these are! For all of us who are too busy, too distracted, too anxious, and too forgetful to remember the words and ways of Jesus, it is such good news that the Holy Spirit is working in our hearts and minds. For those of us who toss and turn at night, and fret and worry all day, it is such good news to hear that Christ’s peace is a gift we can claim. And for those of us who wonder if the corruption, wickedness, and lies of the Evil One will finally rule the day, it is such good news to know that evil has no power over our Lord Christ. Wisdom, peace, and power belong to God and to the Lamb, forever and forever. Thanks be to God! AMEN.