



## Mount Olive Devotion

The 14th Week of Pentecost (August 31-September 4, 2020)

### Monday

Esther 4:11-14

<sup>11</sup> 'All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden sceptre to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days.' <sup>12</sup> When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, <sup>13</sup> Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, 'Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. <sup>14</sup> For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.'

In this week when we celebrate the immeasurable contributions of women to the Church and to the ministry of the people of God down through the ages, it only seems appropriate to begin this week's devotions with the story of Queen Esther. If you have not read this short book (10 chapters), find time to do so; you will be blessed. The passage above comes at a critical time in the story. The wicked royal official, Haman, has decreed that all the Jews in the kingdom be killed, children, women and men, and their property confiscated. Mordecai, the man who raised Esther from a young girl, comes to Esther, now a queen, and begs her to intervene on behalf of her people. She answers that one may only approach the king by invitation. If a person asks to speak to the king and is denied, that person will be put to death. Mordecai then reminds Esther that her identity as a Jew, hidden until now, will certainly come out and she will also perish if she doesn't do something. The final line says it all: "Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." This story challenges those of us who, like Esther, enjoy privilege and power in our community, to consider what it is God is calling us to. Perhaps we also have been given our station in life for such a time as this, that we might intervene on behalf of the powerless.

### Prayer

We thank you, Gracious Lord, for courageous persons of faith like Esther, who risked her life for the people of God. Grant us strength, wisdom, and courage as well, so that when we are called to intervene on behalf of the powerless, we might do so faithfully. We ask this through Christ, our Lord. AMEN.

## Tuesday

Judges 4:4-9

<sup>4</sup>At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. <sup>5</sup>She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgement. <sup>6</sup>She sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, 'The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you, "Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. <sup>7</sup>I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand.'" <sup>8</sup>Barak said to her, 'If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go.' <sup>9</sup>And she said, 'I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.' Then Deborah got up and went with Barak to Kedesh.

Another seldom-mentioned woman in the Old Testament is the prophetess, Deborah. Note in this passage how she was not only a person sought for her wise counsel, but she was also sought out in matters of war. Barak, son Abinoam, a mighty warrior, said to Deborah, "If you will go with me [into battle] I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go." Isn't that interesting. Somehow, for a very long time now, we have overlooked the fact that God's people have, in their history, been led by both men and women. This makes sense since leadership has never been the sole gift of one gender. The prophet Deborah was wise and courageous. We know women who are wise and courageous. We should never be afraid of saying to them, "You are our leader; we will only go forward if you go with us." Also, it behooves women who sense the call of God, to also believe that *they* can lead. Deborah shows us the way.

## Prayer

God of all, we confess that we have sinned in our failure to recognize the gifts of your Spirit that have been granted to women. We confess that our imaginations have been puny in our concept of leaders, whether they be men or women. We confess our prejudice which has failed to give women their due. Grant us wisdom going forward, that we might give to all the freedom to use every gift which you have given. In Christ's Name, we pray. AMEN.

## **Wednesday**

Luke 1:39-45

<sup>39</sup>In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, <sup>40</sup>where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup>When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit <sup>42</sup>and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. <sup>43</sup>And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? <sup>44</sup>For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. <sup>45</sup>And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

The story of Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, is often overlooked because of the presence of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Elizabeth's story, however, is miraculous as well. Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah, a priest, are the first characters introduced to us in the Gospel of Luke. This couple is said to be "righteous before God, living blamelessly," however they have not been given any children, and both are getting on in years. Amidst a vision given to Zechariah, while serving in the temple, it is revealed to them that Elizabeth will bear a son, and they are to name him John. This boy will be "filled with the Holy Spirit" and "make ready a people prepared for the Lord." We can only imagine all the questions that Elizabeth had about this little boy as she waited for his birth. Then one day, not long before Elizabeth is due, she receives a visit from her kinswoman, Mary. When Mary's greeting reaches her ears, Luke tells us that "the child leapt in her womb," and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, was given knowledge that before her was the Christ, in utero, no less. Elizabeth's humble spirit is evident: "Why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" This is a beautiful story about a humble woman whom God used mightily. Like many women in our churches, Elizabeth did not consider herself any great figure, but was overjoyed just to know that God was using her. We do well to give honor to those humble women amongst us who continue to serve so faithfully in our churches today.

## **Prayer**

Thank you, Loving God, for all the faithful women down through the ages who have been agents of blessing to the world. Thank you for humble women, content to serve without acclaim, to quilt and sew and clean and bake, to write and administrate and organize and study, and to do the critical work of parenting those children with whom we are entrusted. Bless these women. Fill them with joy. We pray in Jesus' name. AMEN.

## Thursday

John 20:15-18

<sup>15</sup> Jesus said to [Mary], 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' <sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). <sup>17</sup> Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" <sup>18</sup> Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

In John's gospel, Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb on Easter morning all by herself. It is a clue that the world is really going to be turned upside down at the Resurrection of Christ. First, a woman was unlikely to travel in the dark to a tomb alone. Also, no woman's testimony was given much credence in court, according to Hebrew law, so anything she witnessed would be questioned. Finally, no first century scribe or scholar would have had any expectation that God would reveal the Resurrection of Christ *first* to a woman, and then entrust the message to *her*. Yet this is exactly what God did. God was indeed turning the world upside down. When we ponder who it is that God can use in the ministry of the Gospel it is good to remember this story. Unlikely people – children, the poor, those who are considered outcasts in our community – sometimes have ended up being some of the people God has used more effectively to tell the Gospel story. Perhaps you feel that *you* are someone that God is unlikely to use in this work. Think again. God's ways are not our ways. You may just be the voice that someone needs to hear, as *you* declare, "I have seen the Lord."

## Prayer

God of Surprises, open our eyes to your surprising ways in the world. Open our hearts to receive your Word from those we consider unlikely bearers of that Word. Grant us faith to believe that you might even be calling us to have a role in the spread of your healing Word. In Jesus' name, we pray. AMEN.

## Friday

Acts 18:1-4, 24-26

After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. <sup>2</sup> There he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, <sup>3</sup> and, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them, and they worked together—by trade they were tentmakers. <sup>4</sup> Every sabbath he would argue in the synagogue and would try to convince Jews and Greeks.

<sup>24</sup> Now there came to Ephesus a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria. He was an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures. <sup>25</sup> He had been instructed in the Way of the Lord; and he spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. <sup>26</sup> He began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately.

The story of Aquila and Priscilla is the only story we have in the New Testament of a “clergy couple.” It happened in Corinth, a Greek city where the Apostle Paul spent considerable time. It is instructive to us that this couple, who were clearly tutored by Paul, and capable of instructing others, were apparently well-regarded in the early Christian Church. Although we have examples in Paul’s letters of him instructing women to be silent in the churches, there is no evidence of that here. Whatever the reason for Paul’s instruction elsewhere, it is not needed in Corinth, and both Aquila and Priscilla are granted a leadership role. Isn’t it interesting that today we still argue about the suitability of women to lead churches, when one of the earliest Christian congregations was co-led by a husband and wife? Thankfully, the gifts of both men and women are celebrated in many congregations these days and the people of God are blessed. If you are a woman, be assured, you have an important role to play in the ministry of the Gospel.

## Prayer

Thank you, Almighty God, for women like Priscilla who have led your church. Thank you for others like Catherine of Siena, Katie Luther, Dorothy Day, and those who minister amongst your church in this time. Lift them up in their struggles. Encourage them in their work. Bless them as they seek to bring your blessing to others. In the Name of Christ, we pray. AMEN.