



Mount Olive Devotion

The 19th Week of Pentecost (October 5-October 9, 2020)

Monday

Psalm 78:1-4

¹ Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth. ² I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old, ³ things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us. ⁴ We will not hide them from their children; we will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done.

Psalm 78 is one of three historical psalms in the Bible. The others are psalms 105 and 106. In these psalms the history of Israel is recounted at some length – in this psalm for 72 verses. If you have never read the entire psalm, it is worth doing. The Hebrew people understood that if the history of their people was recounted on regular occasions the generations to come would continue to know the Lord and walk in the Lord's ways. In many ways we do this same thing today. Through the regular readings from the Bible in worship – what we call “the Lectionary” – we hear the story of Jesus and the story of God's ways in the world. We have a regular cycle of readings, not too imaginatively called Years A, B, and C. In Year A we read the Jesus story in the Gospel of Matthew. In Year B we read it in the Gospel of Mark. And in Year C we read the Jesus story in the Gospel of Luke. John's Gospel gets intermixed throughout all three years. Right now we happen to be in Year A, so if you are paying attention, you will notice that most of the gospel readings are from Matthew. Starting in Advent, we will be reading from the Gospel of Mark. This Lectionary reading allows us to hear the story of Jesus year after year so that we remember where we come from as people of God and what is expected of us as followers of Jesus. It is an ancient practice that continues to bless God's people.

Prayer

Gracious God, thank you for your word. Thank you for giving us the Scriptures that guide us and bless us every day. Thank you for the story of the people of God from Abraham all the way down through the writings of the apostles. Thank you for continuing to speak to us through your word. Grant that we might hear, understand, and inwardly ponder it, so that we might continue to grow in faith and live in faithfulness to you. In your holy name, we pray. AMEN.

Tuesday

Psalm 133

¹ How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! ² It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes. ³ It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the LORD ordained his blessing, life forevermore.

Psalm 133 is one of the shortest psalms in the Bible. It is part of a group of psalms called Instructional psalms. In these psalms there is often a comparison between the way of wisdom and the way of fools. There are 14 of these psalms. In this short psalm we see the lesson regarding unity: “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!” Isn’t that exactly the truth. Whether the “kindred” be blood relatives, in-laws, neighbors, church members, or fellow citizens, we know the blessing it is to live together in unity. How wonderful it is when we can join together in common efforts to celebrate, to mourn, to do works of service, or to worship. And how much more we accomplish when we work together in unity. There is amazing power in unity. We also know how difficult unity seems to be, especially these days. The polarization that we are experiencing in our world is wearing on us all. Sometimes our disunity makes it impossible even to get together for a meal or a family wedding or worship. This is so painful. Our disunity also dilutes our efforts to be a blessing to the world. When kindred in faith do not live in unity, so much work that could be done together goes undone. Again, this is so painful and unnecessary. How much better to strive for the unity which the psalmist commends to us.

Prayer

God of all people, forgive us for our penchant to live in disunity. Forgive our petty quarrels which diminish our strength as the Body of Christ. Forgive our failure to forgive and seek unity always. Give us clear minds and strong resolve to move beyond the quarrels of the past into the unity which you desire for us. Through Christ our Lord. AMEN.

Wednesday

Psalm 25:1-7

¹To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul. ²O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me. ³Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame; let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous. ⁴Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths. ⁵Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long. ⁶Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old. ⁷Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness’ sake, O LORD!

As we were growing up we learned many things by heart. Sometimes those things were set to music, like the ABCs. The Hebrew people of the Old Testament lived in a time when *everything* needed to be learned by heart. There were no books, no instruction manuals, no google searches to be had. So in order to pass on the knowledge that was needed for life, parents and teachers needed to teach children everything by rote. Psalm 25 is a good example of that. Though it is not obvious to us in English, Psalm 25 is an acrostic psalm. That means that every verse of the psalm begins with a succeeding letter of the Hebrew alphabet. For example, verse 1 begins with “To you”. In Hebrew, the word “to” is spelled with an aleph – the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet and, you guessed it, there are 22 verses in psalm 25.

What Hebrew children learned by this acrostic psalm is that God can be trusted. They also asked God to teach them wisdom and to lead them in truth. They also asked God to be merciful and not remember the sins of their youth, but to regard them according to the Lord's steadfast love. All these were important lessons which were better remembered when recited according to an acrostic. What are those things that you have memorized? A hymn? A psalm? A prayer? All of those memories sustain us and are part of God's work within us.

Prayer

Thank you, Gracious God, for your care of God's people. Thank you for minds that can learn and memorize, and for teachers who can help us learn. Grant that the lessons of faith that we have learned will continue to sustain us, so that, come what may, we might be found in faith, faithful to you. In your holy name, we pray. AMEN.

Thursday

Psalm 15

¹ O LORD, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill? ² Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart; ³ who do not slander with their tongue, and do no evil to their friends, nor take up a reproach against their neighbors; ⁴ in whose eyes the wicked are despised, but who honor those who fear the LORD; who stand by their oath even to their hurt; ⁵ who do not lend money at interest, and do not take a bribe against the innocent. Those who do these things shall never be moved.

Liturgical psalms are an important part of the psalter. These psalms were often composed for a specific purpose and written to be spoken as a dialogue between a priest and the people. In Psalm 15 we can imagine a priest calling out the opening verse at the entrance to the temple: "O Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?" In the next 4 verses, the people respond: "Those who walk blamelessly... who do not slander...who honor those who fear the Lord,who do not lend money at interest, and do not take a bribe against the innocent." Finally the priest responds: "those who do these things shall never be moved," and from there the people process into the temple. It is noteworthy that here the psalmist reminds us what is required in order to be rightly prepared for worship. It is not having brought the right offering, or having prepared the finest prayers, or having composed the most beautiful music. What is required is a life of integrity. Knowing that we regularly fall short in this regard is why we begin worship most often with confession and forgiveness. As one wise person has said, "We begin with confession because we understand that we, who are *not* holy, are coming into the presence of a God who *is* holy." God then forgives us our sins, and we are ready to enter the temple and worship the Lord.

Prayer

Help us to walk in integrity, O God. Help us to be people of faith who do what is right and speak truth from the heart. Keep us from patterns of hurtful speech.

Give us faithfulness to our promises even when it hurts, and grant us generous and compassionate hearts in our dealings with others. We pray all this in the name of Christ. AMEN.

Friday

Psalm 3

¹ O LORD, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me; ² many are saying to me, “There is no help for you in God.” ³ But you, O LORD, are a shield around me, my glory, and the one who lifts up my head. ⁴ I cry aloud to the LORD, and he answers me from his holy hill. ⁵ I lie down and sleep; I wake again, for the LORD sustains me. ⁶ I am not afraid of ten thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around. ⁷ Rise up, O LORD! Deliver me, O my God! For you strike all my enemies on the cheek; you break the teeth of the wicked. ⁸ Deliverance belongs to the LORD; may your blessing be on your people!

The largest group of psalms in the Bible is individual prayers for help. In these psalms we hear a regular pattern of a call to be heard, a wondering as to where God is, a cry for help, and a testimony as to God’s faithfulness. In Psalm 3 we hear the taunts of those who say there is no use praying to God. That is followed by the psalmist who insists that God is “a shield” and “the one who lifts up my head.” Then comes the testimony that God has answered from “his holy hill” (i.e. Mount Zion), and the psalmist can once again lie down and sleep without fear. This psalm is a good pattern for us whenever we are feeling afraid, or dealing with people who might be making life difficult for us. We might follow the psalmist in describing to God what exactly it is we are facing. Then we should be bold to ask for deliverance. And when deliverance comes, we can make it our joyful task to recall the works that God has done and give thanks and praise to God. We might even become expert at composing our own psalms!

Prayer

Thank you, God of the universe, that you hear our cries for help. Thank you that, even though you are God and we are but mere mortals, you love us and look with compassion upon us. Thank you that our fears, our anxieties, and our struggles are all known to you, and you stand ready to help. Give us faith to come to you in our difficult days and to cry out to you, knowing that you hear the cries of your people, and you will deliver. You are the God of our salvation. For you we wait all the day long. AMEN.