



Mount Olive Devotion

Eighth Week of Pentecost (July 20 – 24, 2020)

Monday

Isaiah 53:4-7

⁴ Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.

⁵ But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.

⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way,
and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

⁷ He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

If you, when you read these words, hear the music of George Friedrich Handel's Messiah in your head, be assured that you are not alone. These words, for centuries, have been a centerpoint of Christian theology, worship, and music. The One accounted "stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted," has, since the earliest days of the Christian community, been identified as Christ. We hear these words, particularly on Good Friday, when we reflect on the death of Christ, but these words have found their way into much of our hymnody, so we are likely to be reciting this passage much more often than we realize. What seems noteworthy in this pandemic time is that Christ not only carries our sins, but also our infirmities and diseases. That the writer likely understood such things as punishments for sin points to the fact that Christ's death not only provides forgiveness but also the completion of any sentence imposed upon the sinner. While we do not understand the present pandemic as punishment for sin, it is good to know that Christ carries our diseases as well as our transgressions.

Prayer

Gracious and Loving Lord, how we thank you for your willingness to endure the bruises by which the world was healed. Grant us grateful hearts, and the willingness to also endure bruises for the sake of the world's healing. In your name, we pray. AMEN.

Tuesday

Psalm 145:13b-19

The LORD is faithful in all his words, and gracious in all his deeds.

¹⁴ The LORD upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down.

¹⁵ The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season.

¹⁶ You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing.

¹⁷ The LORD is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings.

¹⁸ The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.

¹⁹ He fulfills the desire of all who fear him; he also hears their cry, and saves them.

The title of Psalm 145 is “the Greatest and Goodness of God.” It is instructive that being great and good is attributed to one who “upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down.” So often these days, it seems that those who are called ‘great’ are not interested in upholding those who are falling or raising up those who are struggling. Jesus himself, memorably castigated some powerful members of his own religious community who he said tied up “heavy burdens, hard to bear, ... but they themselves [were] unwilling to lift a finger to move them.” (Matt. 23:4) Jesus shows us God’s way. As in Psalm 145, Jesus calls the one who lifts up the struggling, the one who gives food to the hungry, the one who is just in all their ways and kind in all their doings, as the one who is truly great and good. As a Christian community we are called to this. As individual followers of Jesus we model this way.

Prayer

Dearest Jesus, thank you for showing us the true way of greatness and goodness. Thank you for raising up those who are bowed down, and especially for raising *us* up whenever we are bowed down. Grant us compassion toward those who struggle, and a generous spirit toward all in need. In your name, we pray. AMEN.

Wednesday

Psalm 150

- ¹ Praise the LORD! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament!
- ² Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his surpassing greatness!
- ³ Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp!
- ⁴ Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe!
- ⁵ Praise him with clanging cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals!
- ⁶ Let everything that breathes praise the LORD! Praise the LORD!

The final psalm in the Hebrew psalter is a song of praise. It involves an entire orchestra, with brass, strings, percussion, and woodwinds. The imperative throughout the psalm is that in every way possible, by every creature with breath, God is to be praised. In the sanctuary, in worship, God is to be praised. Outside of worship, when one is viewing the stars and moon and planets, God is to be praised. God is to be praised for mighty deeds and for God's quality of "surpassing greatness." Every instrument that can make sounds is employed in this praise, and undoubtedly this also involved dance. And then finally, all creatures – everything that has breath – are called to praise God. This means bees and butterflies, and barnacles and blue whales, and every other creature is called to give praise to God. St. Paul once said that we should "rejoice always." In this pandemic time, we need to do this more than ever. Perhaps we could step outside, view the bees and butterflies, the flowers, and trees, and be inspired to lift our praises to God.

Prayer

Almighty and Loving God, we praise you this day. We praise you for your creation. We praise you for your abundant goodness. We praise you for your wisdom and love. Help us, even in the midst of these pandemic days, to give you praise. Use your creatures all around us to inspire us, and lead us into the way of joy. In your holy name, we pray. AMEN.

Thursday

Hebrews 13:1-6

Let mutual love continue. ² Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. ³ Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. ⁴ Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. ⁵ Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." ⁶ So we can say with confidence,

"The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?"

This final chapter of the letter to the Hebrews is filled with exhortations, but right in the middle of it, there is the reminder "I will never leave you or forsake you." And then there is the quote from Psalm 118: "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?" In the psalm 'helper' is defined as one who is 'on my side.' That is the promise we have. The Lord is on our side. That is not to say that in God's eyes we can do no wrong. No, that would be a false application of this verse. Rather, when God is on our side, we know that God will work for both truth and love, for both justice and goodness. What we learn is that God is never willing to sacrifice either our relationship with God or justice for the sake of truth. God always works towards both. And for that reason we never need to be afraid.

Prayer

Gracious God, you are always near. You promise to never forsake us, and how we need to know this day by day. Grant us faith to live in hope, trusting that, come what may, your pursuit of truth and justice will not sever your ties with us. We are forever in your care, and for that we give thanks. AMEN.

Friday

I John 4:7-12

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹ God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

There is perhaps no more common belief amongst the world's religions than the call to love. People of all faiths affirm the need to care for and honor other persons, and to treat them as we ourselves would want to be treated. What is unique about the Christian call to love is what St. John lifts up in this passage: that God's love was revealed to us by the sending of God's only Son as the "atoning sacrifice for our sins." God's self dying out of love: that is a claim that is uniquely Christian. As a result Christians are called to emulate this love in any way we can, loving in sacrificial ways whenever necessary. And when we do this, says St. John, "God lives in us, and [God's] love is perfected in us." That means that God's love is fulfilled through our acts of love. What a great privilege it is to be called to love, to be called to further the work of Christ's love in the world.

Prayer

Loving God, we praise and thank you for your great love shown most profoundly in Christ's death on the Cross. We confess that the immensity of your love is beyond our imagination. Even so, we boldly ask you to give us an immense love as well. Help us to love ourselves as you do. Help us to love all we encounter, even those who seem unlovable. Help us to love those who are familiar and those who are strangers, so that in all things you might live in us, and your love be perfected through us. In Christ's name, we pray. AMEN.