

Devotions – June 26 – July 2, 2016
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Sunday, June 26, 2016

Texts:

“The woman said to him, ‘Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.’ ‘God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth’.” John 4:19-21, 24

“I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.” Revelation 21:22

The prospective bride and groom were avid outdoors people and environmentalists. Reflecting their interests, they wanted to be married at her father’s tree farm. The parents enlisted my counsel in how to convince the couple that they should be married in the church sanctuary. They presented their case to their daughter and son-in-law to be: What if it rains or is too hot? There will be bugs. Parking will be difficult. Driving into the grounds from the highway might create safety issues, etc., etc. The bottom line is that the parents felt the church sanctuary was the “proper” place for a dignified Christian wedding. The bride and groom won out.

The day turned out to be beautiful. The guests sat comfortably surrounded by tall pine trees. I welcomed the guests with these words: “The setting for [their] ceremony is this cathedral of nature, this sanctuary that exhibits and glorifies God’s creative power and the beauty of His design of the world in which we live. I am reminded of the words of the Psalmist: ‘The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.’ We, indeed, honor God in this place and celebrate God’s presence with us here, even as we celebrate [this couple’s] love for each other, a love that is very much rooted in their shared love of nature, and their particular love of this place which is holy ground to them.”

Let us pray: *Lord God Almighty, thank you for the beautiful sanctuaries in which we gather this day to worship you. They inspire us in our worship. We feel your presence there. But you are not confined to church buildings. Help us to worship you in spirit and in truth. Amen.*



Monday, June 27, 2016

Text: Acts 16:29-33

“The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ They answered, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.’ They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay.”

It is a fascinating story. Paul and Silas had been accused of “disturbing our city.” They were given a “severe flogging” and thrown into prison, their feet chained to a stock. The Roman jailer was ordered to keep them securely bound. But that night a severe earthquake shook the foundation of their prison. The doors were opened and their chains unfastened, allowing them to escape. But Paul and Silas stayed there and witnessed to the terrified jailer, resulting in the jailer and his household be baptized.

Actually, two washings took place. The jailer washed their wounds. They, in turn, washed his soul. Paul refers to baptism as “the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5 NRSV). Older translations employ the phrase “washing of regeneration.” Paul and Silas had been bound in chains in a prison cell, but their minds and spirits were free. The jailer, whose mind and spirit had been bound in fear, gently washed the dirt and encrusted blood from their wounds. In his baptism, the stain of sin was washed clean in the blood of the Lamb and his mind and spirit was liberated from fear. God works in wondrous ways.

Let us pray: *Liberating God, our minds and spirits so often become captive to fear. Help us to “remember our baptism daily” that our minds and spirits may be washed anew in the “waters of rebirth and renewal.” Amen.*



Tuesday, June 28, 2016

Text: Psalm 78:1

“Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth.”

I recently read an excellent biography of Benjamin Franklin by Walter Isaacson, after reading Franklin’s renowned *Autobiography*. Like other Founding Fathers, Franklin espoused Deism, a religious philosophy based solely on reason, in which the God of creation is regarded as, for the most part, disconnected from human activity. Although he had a benevolent attitude toward religion and offered financial support of several churches, he rarely attended worship and was not known to be a man of prayer. It was surprising, then, that during a particularly contentious session of the Constitutional Convention in the summer of 1787, Franklin rose and asked, “How has it happened that we have not hitherto once thought of humbly applying to the Father of lights to illumine our understandings?” At this, he called upon his fellow delegates to engage in prayer, adding, “The longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth—that God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without his aid?”

Let us pray: *Father of lights, in this election year, we pray that you will illumine the citizens of this nation with an understanding of your benevolent will toward all people. Grant us leaders who will seek your will and govern for the good of all. Amen.*



Wednesday, June 29, 2016

Text: Matthew 5:14-16

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

On a voyage to England in 1757, Ben Franklin narrowly escaped a shipwreck as he neared the coast. Writing to a friend, he joked that “Were I a Roman Catholic, perhaps I should on this occasion vow to build a chapel to some saint; but as I am not, if I were to vow at all, it should be to build a *lighthouse*.”

On a trip to the Atlantic provinces of Canada last year, I visited the lighthouse at Peggy’s Cove on the coast of Nova Scotia. It is the most photographed lighthouse in North America. It is a lone sentinel perched on a rocky precipice. One wonders how many lives it saved since it was constructed in 1904 (it replaced a wooden lighthouse built in 1868).

Most lighthouses today, like the one at Peggy’s Cove, are relics of the past, but the church, also built on a Rock, continues to shine its light that many would be saved. Jesus urges us to let our lights shine so that, by our words and our “good works,” others may see Christ Jesus, the Rock of Ages, and be guided safely to the shore of faith and wholeness in relationship with the living God.

Let us pray: *Lord Jesus Christ, our Rock and our Redeemer, so illuminate our minds and spirits with your truth, that the light of your truth will shine through us for others to see and may be led to a living relationship with you. Amen.*



Thursday, June 30, 2016

Text: 1 Corinthians 15:12, 20-22

“Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?” “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.”

American founding father Ben Franklin and German composer/conductor Gustav Mahler lived in different worlds, but both were spiritual seekers. Both had an ongoing quest to understand God in a way that made sense to them. Both expressed hope in an afterlife with varying degrees of certainty.

By pure coincidence, I was finishing a biography of Ben Franklin with Mahler's 2nd Symphony, dubbed "Resurrection," playing in the background. To the strains of this magnificent symphony, I read Franklin's famous epitaph: "The Body of B. Franklin Printer; Like the Cover of an old Book, Its Contents worn out, And stript of its Lettering and Gilding, Lies here, Food for Worms. But the Work shall not be wholly lost: For it will, as he believ'd, appear once more, In a new & more perfect Edition, Corrected and Amended By the Author." Mixed with his characteristic candor and humor, Franklin's epitaph expresses at least a reasoned hope in life after death.

Echoing this hope in a more defined and assured manner is a portion of Mahler's text in the choral portion of his "Resurrection" Symphony: "O believe, my heart, O believe: Nothing to you is lost!

O believe, You were not born for nothing! Have not for nothing, lived, suffered! What was created

Must perish, What perished, rise again! Cease from trembling! Prepare yourself to live! O Pain, You piercer of all things, From you, I have been wrested! O Death, You conqueror of all things, Now, are you conquered! Die shall I in order to live. Rise again, yes, rise again, Will you, my heart, in an instant!

That for which you suffered, To God shall it carry you!"

The belief in an afterlife is not wishful thinking, but a sure and certain hope made possible by the One who proclaimed, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

Let us pray: *Living and Victorious Lord, thank you for the blessed hope of resurrection to eternal life for all believers. Amen.*



Friday, July 1, 2016

Texts:

"And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." John 3:14

"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." John 15:13

Early in May, a 7-year-old girl in Tampa, Florida was saved from certain death when her 2-year-old German Shepherd, Haus, stepped in between her and a diamondback rattlesnake. The dog refused to back down even when the snake bit him at least three times. Remarkably, Haus is expected to survive, although he is so full of venom that he is being cared for around the clock in a veterinary ICU and receiving 4 or 5 vials of anti-venom per day. A fundraising effort has been established with a goal of receiving \$15,000 for his expensive treatment and care. At this writing, \$52,000 in contributions have been received from around the world.

Haus acted instinctively out of love for his master and a desire to protect her at great cost to himself, even a willingness to lay down his life for hers. What is instinctive in the animal world is characteristic of the nature of God who, in Christ, was willing to lay down his life to save from death the ones he loves. That's you and me. He was willing to endure the venomous bite of sin to save the sinful. Thanks be to God for his gracious, amazing love!

Let us pray: *Merciful Father, how can we thank you enough for the atoning death of your Son Jesus Christ, whom you raised from the dead? Move us, by your Spirit, to live sacrificial lives in service to others. Amen.*



Saturday, July 2, 2016

Text: Ephesians 2:4-9

“But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”

It is Memorial Day as I am writing this last devotion for the week. *Saving Private Ryan* is playing on TV. Tom Hanks plays Captain Miller, a school teacher from a small town in Pennsylvania who survived the D-Day invasion at the Omaha beachhead and now finds himself leading a group of soldiers on a quest to find a Private James Ryan whose brothers have been killed in battle. The Army wants him found and safely returned to his already grieving family. Captain Miller wants nothing more than to get the job done and return to his wife and family.

Near the end of the film, Captain Miller lays dying from bullet wounds. Miller weakly mutters something and Ryan leans close to hear. “What, sir?” asks Ryan. Captain Miller, in his dying breath, says, “James, earn this...earn it.”

The film ends where it began, in the present day with an older James Ryan visiting the cemetery at Normandy. He is kneeling at the grave of Captain Miller. Ryan’s wife approaches and sees that James is in tears. “James?” she says with a concerned look. Ryan looks up at her and says, “Tell me I have led a good life.” “What?” she queries. “Tell me I’m a good man.” “You are,” she assures him.

As we honor the memory and sacrifices of those who laid down their lives for others, we remember the One who laid down his life to redeem a fallen humanity. That sacrifice should motivate us to live a good life, a life that matters, a life of willingness to make sacrifices for the sake of others. But we must also know that we cannot and we need not “earn” the sacrifice Christ made for us. That sacrifice was an act of divine love. It was an act of grace, and grace cannot be earned. Let us lead lives of grateful response for the greatest of all gifts—freedom from sin, death and the power of the devil—through the atoning death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Let us pray: *Gracious Father, thank you for the men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice for the freedoms we enjoy. Above all, thank you for the love beyond understanding by which you sacrificed your own dear Son that we may have freedom from sin and death. For this gift that we do not deserve and cannot earn, help us to live lives that show forth our gratitude. Amen.*

