

Devotions – January 8-14, 2017

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Sunday, January 8, 2017

Text: Matthew 3:13-17

Verse: *“And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’”*

This Sunday is “Baptism of Our Lord” day, and it is a favorite Sunday of mine. I like to think of some of my favorite baptism stories. Years ago three sisters were scheduled to be baptized. The girls ranged in age from 4, 8, and 12. The oldest one decided to play some mischief on the youngest one by saying that “when you are baptized you get the Holy Ghost on your head.” The four-year old wanted nothing to do with ghosts so she let it be known she was not going to be “bap-i-tized”. In an attempt to calm her fears, I asked the girls and their parents to come to church and have a “dry-run”. But the little girl adamantly refused to have any part in baptism and was on the verge of tears, or even worse, a tantrum. So in my infinite wisdom I tried to remedy the situation with a bribe. If she would be baptized, I promised cookies, or if preferred, her favorite candy. The bribe failed and the thought of a Sunday baptism by force was unnerving. Finally the 8-year old sister saved the day, proving to be much wiser than me. She told me, “Why don’t you tell us a story about God?” I do not remember what story about God I told, but the good news worked! The Holy Spirit was at work honoring the promise of the Gospel to cast out fear and create faith in Jesus. The four-year old was baptized on Sunday with a grand smile across her face.

Jesus’ baptism is a wonderful story about God. Jesus was baptized to “fulfill all righteousness”, in other words Jesus ministry would be Spirit-endowed to bring the good news of the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. Remember your baptism with joy today, for this blessing is a great uplift each day reminding us that we indeed are the beloved sons and daughters of God.

Let us Pray: *Gracious and merciful God, we remember today the baptism of your Son, Jesus. His plunge into the Jordan River is a sign of Jesus’ full plunge into his gracious work to save us from the powers of sin, death, and devil. We thank you for the benefits you graciously provide in baptism: daily repentance and forgiveness, and the Holy Spirit reminding us that we are your beloved children. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.*



Monday, January 9, 2017

Text: Acts 9: 1-10

Verse: ***“He asked, “Who are you, Lord? The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”***

Saul is the infamous figure who instigated the first persecution of the followers of the Way, or the early Christian community. Earlier in Acts we heard that Saul approved of the murder of Stephen the deacon. Then he began to ravage the church going house-to-house looking for Christians and dragging them away to prison or worse. Saul was fuming with fury against all the followers of the Lord Jesus. The sense of the texts is Saul was constantly on the move viciously attacking the church. Today we read he had the authority of the High Priest to search for Christians in the important city of Damascus.

Saul had his plans but so did Jesus. Saul was struck down by the glory of heaven. One could expect heaven was ready to exact revenge on him. But Saul heard the voice, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” It was a voice expressing pain, for Jesus was identifying with the suffering of his church. Although risen from the dead and Lord, Jesus knew the pain of Saul’s repeated acts of persecution. Saul may have considered himself the proud enemy of Jesus and all his followers. Saul was a zealous man of faith and he felt the church was worshipping a false Messiah and must be eradicated. But Jesus would not and could not eradicate Saul. Jesus died on the cross to reveal a love that eradicates hate. The risen Lord loved Saul and had other plans for him.

Let us Pray: *Merciful God, you know the pain and suffering of your people throughout the world. In the midst of persecution, grant comfort and courage. When thoughts of revenge and condemnation corrupt your people, cleanse hearts with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus to show the way of reconciliation and love. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.*



Tuesday, January 10, 2017

Text: Acts 9: 10-19

Verse: ***“But the Lord said to him, ‘Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel.’”***

I have always been terrible at sports. During school days this fact was well-known on the playground or gym class when teams were chosen for various games. I was usually chosen last by the team which had no other choice. During the games I lived up to my reputation: running too slow or dropping the ball. It would have been laughable if an athletic team captain chose me first.

From yesterday’s text we heard about Saul’s plan to round up Christians for prison in Damascus. But Jesus intervened and Saul was led into the city by hand because he had lost his sight. Enter now dear Saint Ananias who heard the Lord calling him to pay a visit at the home of Judas and heal a man of his blindness. The man was Saul, not just any Saul, but Saul of Tarsus, the feared

persecutor of the church. Ananias could not believe his ears and had the nerve to remind the Lord just whom he was talking about: he has done much evil to the saints in Jerusalem and was now sent to Damascus to arrest Christians. Was this a case of mistaken identity? No, Jesus replied, Saul is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name (gospel) to Gentiles and kings.

When Ananias located Saul he said something amazing and beautiful: “Brother Saul”. The man Ananias felt was the church’s worst nightmare was now his brother in Christ. A prayer was said with the laying on of hands; Saul regained his sight, was baptized, and received the Holy Spirit. Saul was the chosen one of Jesus to bring the gospel before the Gentiles. Just think, Saul the zealous Pharisee was going to be empowered by the Spirit of God to go to people he was taught to avoid. What a choice! Who would have expected Saul to be chosen for anything to do with the mission of the church? But the ways and will of God can be full of surprises. Jesus said Saul was his chosen instrument—the same word was used by Saul (known now by Paul) in his letter 2 Corinthians: “We have this treasure in earthen vessels.” As Christians we are chosen by God, and God’s grace, mercy, and love are entrusted to us “earthen vessels” “so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us (2 Corinthians 4: 7ff). Yes, we are like earthen vessels, human, frail, and sinful, yet we have the treasure of Jesus ever with us. By his love he enables us to bring the good news of his name to others.

Let us Pray: God of surprises, is it really true you have chosen me to be your instrument of mission and witness? I can doubt the wisdom of your choice and forgive me for that. Help me to remember my baptism every day where your cleansing grace and abundant love remove the scales of doubt from my eyes and I see and understand your call to share your love in ways the Holy Spirit provides. Thank you for choosing me to bring the good news of your mercy and faithfulness to someone in need of your love. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.



Wednesday January 11, 2017

Text: Acts 9: 20-31

Verse: ***“He began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, ‘He is the Son of God.’”***

Talk about a complete turnaround! Saul, the persecutor-in-chief of the church of Jesus Christ, now proclaimed him “Son of God”, the Messiah, the Lord. At the time Damascus had a large Jewish community and Saul was preaching Jesus in the synagogues whenever he could. This would be a pattern for Saul, soon to be called Paul, on his missionary journeys. Although the apostle to the Gentiles, he would often seek to preach, teach, and debate in the city synagogues. Paul would never, ever renounce his Jewish faith. He cherished the heritage of the Patriarchs and the promises of God. He believed Jesus was the fulfillment of the promise of a Savior, and the Jewish people were called indeed to be a light to the Gentiles.

Saul did not live happily ever after his conversion. His bold proclamation of Jesus as Son of God and Lord made him a target of persecution he at one time fostered. He faced danger and death and made a harrowing night time escape hidden in a basket and lowered over the city wall. When

Saul arrived back in Jerusalem, the Christian community just could not accept he was a disciple. The memory of the damage he had done to the church was just too fresh. But in came Barnabas who vouched for him and told the church about Saul's conversion. Saul's zeal for the Lord Jesus led to some lively debates and also death threats. Saul had to leave Jerusalem for his own safety. It was a tough time to be a Christian! But notice how Saul was assisted in his calling by other Christians. First we heard of Ananias who prayed for his earlier healing, baptism, and reception of the Holy Spirit. The Christians in Damascus helped him in a daring escape from plots against his life. Then we heard of Barnabas, whose name means "son of encouragement." He lived up to his name assuring the Jerusalem Church that Saul's change from persecutor to apostle was the real deal. And then still more death threats; the believers concerned for Saul's safety accompanied him out of the city.

The church is the Body of Christ, connected to one another for the common good. The common good of the church, as a community of faith, hope and love calls each one of us to be sons and daughters of encouragement. As Paul would write in 1 Corinthians 14:3, we are to build up, console and encourage one another.

Let us Pray: *Loving God, you are the great encourager: your love is steadfast. Jesus said 'I am with you always', and the Holy Spirit ever reminds us we are the beloved children of God. Help us to encourage, build up, and console one another. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*



Thursday, January 12, 2017

Text: Acts 10: 44-48

Verse: ***"Peter said, 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?'"***

I was having lunch in a local bar owned and operated by members of the church. A man was there playing one of those digital gambling machines. After he collected his few dollars of winnings, a conversation began and a friendship was born. The man's name is Larry and he doesn't live all that far from the church. After a while I even would stop by his house. He was always generous giving me meat he had recently purchased in quantity from a meat market in Iron River, MI. Although not a church attendee he was adamant about his belief in Jesus. After a pleasant visit, I rose to leave and thanked him for his hospitality. But with a gruff voice he ordered me not to leave and told me to sit down saying, "Have you forgotten something?" I wondered what this was all about. He told me I must say a prayer for him—funny how pastors can forget that at times. So from then on, after every visit, I sit down for a scripture reading and prayer. Over time in our conversations I found out Larry had not been baptized. I asked him if he would like to be baptized and he said 'yes' but scheduling turned out to be delayed. Every time I saw him I asked him about baptism and it began to annoy him. He told me he would tell me when he was ready. The time finally came and a Sunday in June was scheduled but Larry added a condition: it would be after the Sunday service. The sponsors were selected: a family who

cared about him which included three children, ages 8, 12, and 15—the kids were active in the church). But then I began to have doubts: usually for adult baptisms I would have a time of instruction. But this did not happen. But the baptism was scheduled in the quiet of the sanctuary after the morning service. When I asked Larry if he believed in Jesus, the Son of God, he said “Absolutely!” My doubts were dispelled and could anyone withhold baptism for someone with such a confident faith?

Let us Pray: Thank you, gracious God, for the faithful work of the Holy Spirit working in people’s hearts with steadfast love connecting them to Jesus and his gift of forgiveness of sins, new life and salvation. Help us to find assurance each day in the gift of baptism: water, word, and Holy Spirit, all adding up to bring us the immeasurable love of Jesus; in his name we pray. Amen.



Friday, January 13, 2017

Text: 1 John 2: 18-25

Verse: ***“Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son.”***

Happy Friday the 13th! On this day superstition-lovers are probably taking necessary precautions for protection from bad luck. This weekend a Confirmation lock-in is scheduled, and the class thought it was cool that it would include this infamous day. In the spirit of this day I have chosen a reading that mentioned the “antichrist.” The “New Book of Festivals and Commemorations” recognizes this day as a remembrance of Hilary, Bishop of Poitiers who died on this day in 367. The man’s name means “Cheerful” and he was born from a pagan family in 315. He was baptized when he was thirty years old. Although he was married with a family, and a layman, he was elected Bishop of Poitiers—an election of a bishop was different in those days. Hilary was not afraid of controversy and got into hot-water over a theological controversy threatening the orthodox faith of the time. The Emperor kicked him out of France and exiled him to Asia Minor. He wrote theological works and hymns. He was allowed to return to Poitiers and was greeted with joy filled acclamation. His greatest work was to defend the divinity of Jesus against those who wrote Jesus was a creation of God the Father. Hilary wrote that he desired to use the gift of speech to proclaim the truth of Jesus’ divinity and the Trinity, writing, “But I need to pray for your help and mercy, so that, when I spread the sails of our faith you will fill them with the breath of your Spirit to drive us onward. I need not be afraid. We have the promise, and he who made the promise is trustworthy, “Ask and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.”

The ‘antichrist’ found in today’s reading does not refer to some political figure we happen not to like, or world leader we fear. It referred to people who denied all kinds of things about Jesus, specifically they deny that Jesus, the Son of God, became a human being, to dwell on this earth and reveal the constant love and saving passion of God. As we share our faith, and people inquire about our beliefs, we may hear rebuttals and denials about the saving power of Jesus,

both Savior and Lord. But Hilary of Poitiers gave good counsel: do not be afraid to defend the faith, and rely on prayer for the Spirit's guidance and direction.

Let us Pray: *Almighty God, your servant Hilary defended the divinity of Jesus Christ your Son. Give us, we pray, a deeper understanding of this mystery and help us profess it in all truth, that we may rejoice in having you for our Father, and may abide in your Son, in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit; who live and reign, one God, now and forever. Amen. (From "New Book of Festivals and Commemorations" by Phillip Pfatteicher)*



Saturday, January 14, 2017

Text: Ezekiel 34: 11-16

Verse: ***"For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out."***

Today I learned that the Lutheran Church remembers the life and ministry of Eivind Josef Berggrav, Bishop of Oslo who died on this date in 1959. Bishop Berggrav is hardly a household name here although it may be different in Norway. He was a well educated man studying theology not only in his native Norway but also England and Germany. He served a small rural parish, became a prison chaplain, and then was elected Bishop of Oslo. His role as a leader in the Church of Norway took place in the throes of the Nazi invasion and occupation in 1940. With other bishops in Norway, he insisted on non-interference in the spiritual work of the church and the rights of the Jews. The Nazi puppet government deprived Rev. Berggrav of his title as Bishop and designated him "an ordinary private person". He was put under house arrest in 1942. Berggrav would continue to meet with clergy--often in disguise—as an underground church was formed to resist the policies of the puppet government.

What a test of faith and courage for the church when dealing with the evil of Nazi tyranny. In a document written by Berggrav secretly while under house arrest he said, "It cannot be denied that revolt is Christian....Where God's orders are trodden underfoot and the right of one's fellow man to live is threatened at the very outset, there the Christian must be willing to go the way of sacrifice, even if it involves revolt against illegal authority." Certainly we pray for Christians who live in countries where there is tyranny and cruelty and where the church's very existence is under threat. I think again of Berggrav's words "revolt is Christian". Can it be true his words even apply to us who live in comfort and freedom? Prayer is revolt against hopelessness. Worship is revolt against thinking all that I have and do is entirely from my own strength and prowess. Praise is revolt against despair. Welcome and witness is revolt against a privatized faith. Stewardship is revolt against selfishness. Our faith is revolt against complacency because we love and serve God who is like a shepherd who seeks the lost, tends to the wounded and seeks justice for all the earth. We know the Bible says faith is active in love, and it can be radical to also say faith is radical in revolt, revolt against the ideologies and systems that dehumanize and demonize, but hopes instead to find the lost and lift them with the healing gospel of Jesus' love for all.

Let us Pray: *“Mighty God, you gave your servant Eivind Berggrav, together with the bishops and faithful priests of Norway, strength and courage to resist tyranny, to defend your ancient people the Jews, and to uphold the rights of your church: So strengthen our faith by their witness, we pray, that we in our generation may serve you faithfully and confess your Name before the world; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.” Amen (From “The New Book of Festivals and Commemorations).*

