

..... **Daily Devotions**

January 28 – February 3, 2018

By Pastor Kay Richter

New Evangelical Lutheran Parish

Ewen, Paynesville, Trout Creek

Sunday, January 28, 2018

Read: Mark 1:21-28

They were astounded at Jesus' teaching, for he taught as one having authority ...

The project was total chaos. The parade float was supposed to be complete in two weeks, but the flatbed wasn't even at the garage yet. There were no plans for what would go onto it, either. Then someone took charge. "Where is the trailer now?" she asked. "Who normally tows it to the garage?" "That person can't, who else can?" She called a friend to take care of it. "What's the theme of the parade?" On and on went the questions, and soon there was a plan. She just took charge. She had authority. She knew what she was talking about. She knew how to plan a project and bring it to completion.

Maybe you've seen this happen, too. A teacher, a leader, a speaker ... someone who so obviously knows what's going on that everyone pays attention. Apparently, Jesus had that sort of presence when he was teaching. And then he went a step farther – or maybe it was a quantum leap farther – by casting out an evil spirit. Not only did Jesus have the knowledge and authority for teaching, he could also command spirits and they obeyed him! Jesus had power to influence people and power to change the spiritual world and power to cure diseases! Of course, his fame spread like wildfire!

Such power astounds and astonishes people. The evil spirit sees the ultimate reality. "Have you come to destroy us? ... Holy One of God." We know that the ultimate answer is "yes". Yes, Jesus has come to destroy evil. Jesus has come to defeat all evil, including death itself. The Holy One of God has overcome all evil – yes, even death itself – and he has done it without becoming another source of destruction. He has done it through love.

Such power to overcome with the power of love still astounds us humans. And yet, when I remember our project leader, I realize that none of us would have listened to her if we thought she didn't care about us or the project. Isn't that true of teachers and leaders and speakers whom you remember and respect? If they didn't care, we wouldn't listen, would we?

Jesus cares. Jesus overcomes. Are you listening?

Let us pray. *Jesus, you gave your life to overcome evil and death because of your love for us. Help us to hear your words and respond, so that we can be part of overcoming evil in our world. Amen*



Monday, January 29, 2018

Read: Psalm 35:1-10

All my bones shall say, “O Lord, who is like you?”

It was a series of terrible days. A teen stepped out in front of a pickup and got hit. First responders happened to be attending a retirement party next door and they rushed into action, managing to keep the boy alive until the ambulance whisked him off to the hospital. No amount of heroic effort could reverse the damage to his brain, however. A few days later, he died from his injuries. The driver of the truck was also a teenager – a mere two years older than the boy he had accidentally killed. Blame abounded. Shaming began. He was tried as a juvenile for vehicular manslaughter and given probation. The night before his release from jail someone spray-painted the word “MURDERER” on his family’s home. Many of those who had blamed and shamed formed a work crew and scrubbed the house clean before his family returned from the detention center.

In the midst of dark times, we look to God for help. But God did not heal the boy’s injuries; God did not cast death out of the hospital room; and God did not get the driver off the hook. God did, however, change the hearts of many, and THAT is perhaps an even greater miracle.

Like the psalmist, we often want God to destroy those who have hurt us – whether the hurt was intentional or not. We want to fight back. We want God to join with us in the fight. When someone else took on that job for this small community, when someone did strike back, they realized that maybe they didn’t really want what they’d been asking for.

“O Lord, who is like you?” Who could transform such powerful anger and pain into concern and sympathy? Who could deliver the guilty into the hands of people who were willing to forgive? Who could use death and trial and conviction to bring a community closer together? Who could transform a Roman instrument of torture and death into the means of salvation? Who could change death into the gateway to new life? “O Lord, who is like you?”

Let us pray. *Jesus, when we are hurting we look to you for help. Help us to heal, rather than lash out at others, so that we in turn can help heal the world. Amen*



Tuesday, January 30, 2018

Read: 1 Corinthians 7:32-40

I say this ... to promote unhindered devotion to the Lord.”

When I was in high school, my little brother had a pet rabbit. It was kept in a cage outside, and one day it managed to escape. We searched but could not find it. Then our dog emerged from under a stand of evergreens in our back yard – with the rabbit hanging limply in her mouth. She was a trained hunting dog – of course, she could find it! We feared the worst. Mom called the dog over and gave the command. The dog dropped the rabbit at Mom’s feet. It appeared uninjured – no blood, no scrapes – but it didn’t move. Mom picked it up – it was still breathing! Mom brought it inside and held it in her lap for a long while. Eventually, its panic subsided and it began to move. It was completely unharmed! Our dog was a trained hunting dog – she was taught to carefully carry whatever game animal she was retrieving, doing no damage, even if it was still alive. She had followed her training perfectly!

Paul and the people in Corinth were expecting Jesus to return any moment, and they were trying to figure out how to live their lives while they waited for Jesus’ return. In Chapter 7 of this letter, Paul is responding to questions that the congregation has brought to him – questions about marriage, among other things. Paul’s basic response is in 7:17, “Let each of you live the life that the Lord has assigned, to which God has called you,” then he gives specifics about circumcision and slavery and marriage. The key to all of the specific instructions seems to be staying focused on the affairs of the Lord – no allowing anything in this world to distract from that, including earthly loving relationships.

Not getting distracted can be tough. Things in this world are right in front of us – while God is invisible. The people we love are right there beside us – while we cannot see God. So, Paul’s advice is to focus on being the person God created us to be. If you’re married, that’s fine; if you’re single, that’s fine, too. If you’re engaged go ahead and get married, or you can wait for a while, if that’s what you want to do.

In the larger context, we see that Paul’s instructions are about caring for one another, building up the community, not tearing others down, not worshiping idols, not being greedy, or in general being imitators of Christ and using the unique gifts that God has given to them. “In all that you do,” Paul says, in unfamiliar circumstances, no matter what, “use the training you have received as followers of Christ.”

Let us pray. Jesus, help us to follow the training you have given to us so that we are not distracted from your call for us to follow you. Help us to make good decisions even in unfamiliar situations, so that we continue to imitate you. Amen



Wednesday, January 31, 2018

Read: Jeremiah 29:1-14

Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

The Cold Within

Six humans trapped by happenstance
In black and bitter cold:
Each possessed a stick of wood,
Or so the story's told.

Their dying fire in need of logs,
The first woman held hers back,
For on the faces around the fire
She noticed one was black.

The next man looking cross the way
Saw one not of his church,
And could not bring himself to give
The fire his stick of birch.

The third one sat in tattered clothes,
He gave his coat a hitch.
Why should his log be put to use
To warm the idle rich?

The rich man just sat back and thought
Of the wealth he had in store,
And how to keep what he had earned
From the lazy, shiftless poor.

The black man's face bespoke revenge
As the fire passed from his sight.
For all he saw in his stick of wood
Was a chance to spite the white.

And the last of this forlorn group
Did naught except for gain.
Giving only to those who gave
Was how he played the game.

The logs held tight in death's still hands
Was proof of human sin.
They didn't die from the cold without;
They died from the cold within.

Author Unknown

Jeremiah saw his world destroyed – crushed by the powerful Babylonian military. The few leaders who survived had been sent off to exile – living far from home as slaves of their conquerors. Jeremiah had seen this coming and tried to warn them, but his prophecy had fallen on deaf ears. Now he has the daunting task of bringing comfort to those who are captives so far from home. No doubt his message is again a shock. “Help the people who conquered and captured you. Pray for them. Their day is coming, but for now the only way for you to prosper is to make sure that THEY prosper.” No word of revenge. No encouragement toward rebellion. “Work together with them. Prosper together with them.”

In our world, too, we are called to work together with those we consider enemies – working for the prosperity of all. If we seek prosperity for only ourselves, we work against God's ways. If we work to harm some, we wind up harming ourselves. God cares for ALL people. In working for the prosperity of ALL people, we will ALL prosper.

Let us pray. *Jesus, help us to look beyond rivalries so that we can join together and work for the good of all people. Bless us and our rivals so that all may see the prosperity you offer. Amen*



Thursday, February 1, 2018

Read: Psalm 147:1-11, 20

The Lord's delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the speed of a runner, but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love.

There is a scene in the movie *Bruce Almighty* when Bruce – who is temporarily in the form of God – is trying to get his former girlfriend to fall back in love with him. He turns to God and

says, “How do I make her love me?” God responds, “When you figure *that one* out, let me know,” and walks away.

God can create anything – plant, animal, mineral, whatever. God can give a horse incredible power, speed, and strength. God can give humans knowledge and skill and talent. But God cannot force a human to return the love that God has so freely given.

The Lord’s delight is not in those things that God can create. Oh sure, God is thrilled when a person uses her intellect and intuition to find a cure for disease, when a person uses his creativity and skill to paint a masterpiece, when a group works together to build a community center where children will be safe and healthy. But God truly *delights* when human begins look to their creator with the eyes of love and hope and respect.

What parent doesn’t rejoice when their children accomplish something that they themselves cannot do?

Let us pray. *Jesus, help us to use our talents and skills to make your world a better place for all people. And fill us with love so that we can bring you delight in all we do. Amen*



Friday, February 2, 2018

Read: Luke 2:22-40 (Presentation of Our Lord)

Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the Temple ...

Have you ever worked on a problem for so long that you could no longer think straight? Or stared at something for such a long time that you could no longer see what was right in front of your nose? Or you’ve known someone long enough that you know everything about them only to find yourself second-guessing whether their eyes were light blue or a shade of gray with just a rim of dark blue along the edge.

Indeed, this passage from Luke 2 is so familiar that I nearly overlooked it again during this Christmas season. Simeon and Anna are at the Temple and offer their prophetic words when Mary and Joseph arrive with Jesus. But wait! Simeon – a man in Jerusalem – was guided by the Spirit to go to the Temple? Simeon wasn’t already there, like Anna the prophet was? Simeon was an ordinary layman who listened to the guiding of the Holy Spirit? Okay, being righteous and devout and listening to the Spirit’s nudging makes him a bit extraordinary. However, he is not called a prophet? Only Anna is.

How often do we overlook a message from God because the person who delivers it is an “ordinary” person and we don’t really notice that person anymore? Or maybe we have failed to heed the nudge of the Holy Spirit and so we don’t show up where God is guiding us to be?

Our God came into this world in the most extraordinary way – through the birth of an ordinary infant. Simeon and Anna recognized this. When we watch for the extraordinary within the ordinary, we are often blessed, as they were, to encounter the living God.

Let us pray. *Jesus, help us to pause long enough to look at the ordinary things around us and to listen to the Holy Spirit’s guidance so that we truly see you whenever and wherever you show up. Amen*



Saturday, February 3, 2018

Read: Isaiah 46:1-13

These things you carry are loaded as burdens on weary animals.

Everyone in the campground “oohed” and “aahed” at the bright, shiny RV. It was their first, and they were so proud. A satellite dish fed the signal to their big screen HDTV. Remote controls lowered awnings for protection from sun and rain. Heated and air-conditioned, it was luxury on wheels! They spent the weekend with friends then drove the RV home. The construction crew had poured the concrete slab beside the driveway two weeks before in anticipation of this day. The new, shiny RV was home at last – parked beside the driveway for all to see and admire.

Monday morning they went back to work. She took on extra projects at her accounting firm – spending long hours at the office. He volunteered for all of the overtime shifts that were available at his advertising company. They’d talked about this and planned for this when they made the down payment on the RV. They would need those bigger checks to make the loan payments and to cover the insurance. It was a sacrifice they were willing to make, and next year they would meet up with those same friends in the same campground for the weekend.

Have you ever asked the question, “Do I own my possessions or do my possessions own me?” Have you ever wondered if you invest more time, energy, and even money into the things around you than they are really worth? Has the stuff become a burden rather than offering a benefit?

Isaiah asks a similar question of the people of Israel. Take a look at the gods of your neighbors that you seem to admire so much. That statue is a hunk of gold or silver molded and carved by a

skilled craftsman. It is then lifted onto an animal to transport it home and it is carried into the house and set in its place. It is both a financial burden and a physical one. It doesn't do anyone any good. There is only one true God – the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

This God, the God of Jesus of Nazareth, reminds us to examine the priorities we have set in our own lives. Are we carrying burdens that are not worth the effort? Have we placed “gods” in our midst and neglected the one true God? Have we abandoned the one who lifts our burdens because we want something shiny and new in our lives?

Let us pray. *Jesus, help us to see when we are creating burdens for ourselves. Free us to praise and worship only you. Amen*

