

Devotions – January 12-18, 2020

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Sunday January 12, 2020

Text: Matthew 3:13-17

Verse: **“John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?’ But Jesus answered him, saying, “Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”**

We are back at the Jordan River. In the Advent season we heard the locust-and-wild-honey eating John the Baptizer preach a strong word of repentance. People came out in large numbers to be baptized, a baptism accompanied by the confession of sins. John spoke of a greater one coming who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. Now in this first Sunday after Epiphany we remember Jesus showing up to be baptized by John.

But John hesitated. Only in Matthew’s gospel do we have a dialog between Jesus and John. John knew Jesus, the promised Messiah. If that be the case the roles must be reversed—Jesus should baptize John. Jesus insisted on being baptized because “it was proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” New Testament scholar Frederick Dale Bruner commented this revealed Jesus’ first miracle, the miracle of humility. The one whose sandals John was unworthy to untie would willingly be submerged beneath the waters of the Jordan to reveal the impetus of Jesus’ ministry: the righteousness of immeasurable love for sinners.

One time as a pastor I was mean. I held up a baptism of a baby because one of the chosen sponsors was not baptized. I insisted she take instruction and be baptized herself. She did and I thought it would be a wonderful Sunday of grace with a double baptism, baby and sponsor. But it almost did not happen. The chosen sponsor apparently partied too hard Saturday night and shall we say on Sunday morning was more hung-over than holy. She was going to pass on the ceremony probably out of fear of passing out. But *her* parents insisted that she be baptized on the appointed Sunday. She did not look well, but she was baptized in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. One could have thought her baptismal sponsorship did not get off to a good start. But thankfully the grace of baptism does not depend on our worthiness. Jesus did not need to be baptized that one day by the Jordan. But he did so to reveal righteousness, God’s decision not to reject the sinful but to call, welcome and forgive them.

Prayer: *O God our Father, at the baptism of Jesus you proclaimed him your beloved Son and anointed him with the Holy Spirit. Make all who are baptized into Christ faithful to their calling to be your daughters and sons, and empower us all with your Spirit, through Jesus Christ, our*

Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.



Monday January 13, 2020

Text: Matthew 3:13-17

Verse: **“And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”**”

Baptism of Our Lord II

Jesus began his ministry of humble service by hearing the voice of blessing from heaven; He is God’s beloved Son. Jesus was equipped for ministry with the Holy Spirit. Jesus would need the Holy Spirit for his ministry would put him in conflict with hostile forces, evil at work to oppose Jesus’ merciful revelation of the Kingdom of heaven. The Spirit would ever help Jesus remember the powerful word at his baptism: he was God’s beloved Son.

Years ago after the Sunday service I would have to hurry to my Sunday School class, a group of 5th and 6th graders. There was a boy in the class who was not popular. He was not befriended and may even been bullied by some of the other boys in class. The boy was new to the town and somehow that made him a target. He was raised by a single parent, his mother, and he had an older sister. They joined the church and soon all three would be baptized. This was a teachable moment, I thought to myself as I talked to the class. I announced to the class that next Sunday the boy would be baptized, and that would mean he would be their brother in Christ. I thought this would ease some of the animosity toward him.

The next Sunday, with the newly baptized boy in class, one of the other boys raised his hand. He had the nerve to tell me he had proof that the new kid was not his “brother”. With a confident smirk he announced, “I was baptized Anglican, and he was baptized Lutheran.” Oh, what a teachable moment fell into my lap. And so the class had a discussion about the power of baptism. One is not baptized into a church name, but is baptized in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So the truth of being brothers and sisters in Jesus remains. Thankfully we have the work of the Holy Spirit who is ever at work, with the Gospel Word, to remind us of the healing and unifying grace of baptism; we are beloved sisters and brothers in Christ.

Prayer: *God of love, we are thankful for the work of the Holy Spirit, faithfully revealing to us the love and forgiveness of Jesus. Help us to be open to the Spirit's work in our lives, that we know we ever remain your beloved children, and that this healing gift is true for others. Unify your people so in our wonderful variety we never forget we are sisters and brothers in Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.*



Tuesday January 14, 2020

Text: Acts 8:4-13

Verse: **“But when they believed Philip, who was proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women”**

Our reading today is a portion of the 8th chapter of Acts which describes the ministry of Philip. Philip was doing his evangelism work in Samaria. The people were responding enthusiastically to Philip's message of the kingdom of God and the good news of Jesus. The Holy Spirit calls and gathers the people of God when the gospel of Jesus is preached. Responding in faith to the gospel the people were baptized.

The text said, “even Simon believed...after being baptized he stayed constantly with Philip.” Simon was some sort of magician and had gathered quite a following. He must have been quite a speaker/performer because people listened to him eagerly and judged him as someone great. Simon must have been someone like a carnival barker or motivational speaker. He was doing what he was doing for the money.

But the text said he believed in Jesus Christ and was baptized. It looked like the real deal until you read further in the 8th chapter. When Peter and John came to survey the scene in Samaria and pray for the newly baptized, the people received the Holy Spirit. When Simon saw with amazement the work of the Holy Spirit among the people, he offered to buy the Spirit. Peter was appalled at such a request and made the spiritual diagnosis that Simon's heart was full of bitterness. Peter saw through Simon's act: Simon was jealous of Philip and wanted to buy into the power of the Holy Spirit, possibly to use in his own magic show. Peter told Simon to repent and he better be quick about it.

It may sound odd or even funny that someone wanted to buy a share of the Holy Spirit. Simon was not the last one to seek to buy spiritual benefits. The sin of “Simony”, or buying church

offices, has been known in the history of the church. Jesus must have been concerned about the danger of the appeal of money to enhance power. He drove out buyers and sellers in the Temple courtyard complaining they were turning God's house of prayer into a den (hiding place) for robbers. Luther saw the danger in his day of the sale of indulgences, as if spiritual benefits could be purchased. Forgiveness of sins is a gift. Baptism gives victory over sin and death without the need for silver or gold because we are baptized into Christ Jesus who redeemed us with his "holy and precious blood and innocent suffering and death." Yes, the Holy Spirit gives power not to enhance our standing or status but to encourage and build up one another.

Prayer: *Gracious God, thank you for the work of the Holy Spirit among your people. Guard our hearts from greed and bitterness in the work of your church. Keep us faithful like Philip, who preached the good news among people who were often despised. Help us know that the Holy Spirit works among all the children of God and there are no favorites. May we never lose sight of the gifts of the Spirit, given for the benefit of all. Amen.*



Wednesday January 15, 2020

Text: Matthew 12:15-21

Verse: **“He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick until he brings justice to victory.”**

Jesus' ministry had wonderful results. So many people were being cured and so the crowds followed him. St. Matthew liked to use Scripture to comment on Jesus' ministry. Matthew cited the prophets to show that Jesus was a servant. As a servant he was gentle with people. Jesus did not come to find fault with people's failings, but to show mercy. We know Jesus had his critics usually faulting Jesus for not fully following Torah or God's gift of teaching. For example, Jesus was faulted for healing on the Sabbath. Jesus certainly knew the letter of the Law, but he also knew the deeper meaning, the spirit of the Law. A couple of times in Matthew, Jesus told his critics to go and learn what the following scripture means: "God desires mercy and not sacrifice."

Jesus was concerned with justice. This was not courtroom justice but heavenly justice; a synonym would be righteousness. God's justice and righteousness included steadfast love, healing, and hope for not only Israel, but also the Gentiles were included.

Today is Martin Luther King's birthday. If he lived he would be 91 years old. He wrote an imaginary letter of Paul to American Christians. In that letter he concluded:

The greatest of all virtues is love. Here we find the true meaning of the Christian faith and of the cross. Calvary is a telescope through which we look into the long vista of eternity and see the love of God breaking into time. Out of the hugeness of his generosity God allowed his only-begotten Son to die that we may live. By uniting yourselves with Christ and others through love you will be able to matriculate in the University of Eternal Life. In a world depending on force, coercive tyranny, and bloody violence, you are challenged to follow the way of love. You will then discover that unarmed love is the most powerful force in all the world.

Prayer: Gracious God, thank you for Jesus who manifested the way of mercy by showing gentleness to the hurting and weak, and granting hope for those who figured it was impossible. May we ever keep in mind Jesus' words as we seek to follow him that he desires his people, the church, to show mercy. Amen.



Thursday, January 16, 2020

Text: Psalm 40:1-11

Verse: **“God put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord.”**

As a college student I became involved in a Campus Christian group. For a while things were okay within this group, but then I became uncomfortable. The leadership wanted to control my life: telling me what church I should attend, and do not attend a Lutheran Church by the way. Do not study on weekends for tests if it conflicted with a planned Bible study retreat. And get this one, telling a nineteen-year old male that if you are attracted to a girl put a bag over your head to prevent lustful thoughts. Hah! At every event sponsored by this campus group I heard the invitation to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior and then you will receive a marvelous sense of peace. I must have accepted Jesus multiple times as directed but where was the peace? One could call this Christian group misguided, misleading, and out-in-out missing the boat with the message of Scripture.

Against their advice I returned to the Lutheran Church and heard preaching that did give peace, the good news of Jesus, the good news of grace and acceptance from the Savior who loved me and gave himself for me. A new song was put in my mouth. The song of fear of never pleasing

God was replaced by a song with a different kind of fear which is awe with the compassion and companionship of God.

The Psalmist said, “Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear.” Sometimes a message slips into the church that one is not good enough or acceptable to God unless a certain ideal is met, to offer more and sacrifice more. But King David discovered, Martin Luther discovered, and may we ever be refreshed by the discovery of grace that is truly throughout the Scriptures. The love of God, the salvation of God, the forgiveness from Jesus is never earned but given. Indeed this generosity puts a new song in our mouths, praising God for guardian peace. As the Psalm said, we have been given an open ear so we hear the Gospel, the joyful news of “God’s saving help and faithfulness.”

Prayer: Thank you, merciful God, for your wondrous deeds and thoughts toward us. Put a new song in our mouth, a song of praise and thanksgiving for your steadfast love and healing grace. Amen



Friday January 17, 2020

Text: Matthew 19:16-26

Verse: **“Jesus said ‘if you wish to be perfect, go sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’”**

Today the church remembers St. Anthony, considered the founder of monasticism. Anthony was born in Memphis (Egypt, not Tennessee) in the year 251. Anthony was a city boy with a sizeable fortune, but he was struck by Jesus’ words in today’s reading. Jesus told the man with many possessions to sell them and give the proceeds to the poor. Only then would he be ‘perfect’. Here the term does not mean without sin but “completing what he lacked.” Anthony took the text to heart and gave away his possessions to benefit the poor. He did keep some of his money because he was concerned about supporting his sister. But then he read Jesus’ words: “Do not worry about tomorrow,” so he gave away all his funds and arranged support for his sister’s care with Christian women. Anthony left to live alone in the Egyptian desert. But he learned it can be harmful to faith to be alone, so he gathered others who wished to leave behind worldly wealth and worries and live the communal life.

There are people today who feel the call to live full time a Religious Life and take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. If we do not feel the call to live the communal life full-time what can we learn from Anthony who spent most of his life in the Egyptian desert? For one thing he took the words of Jesus to heart. We may think selling all possessions is too radical, but this text can serve as a warning about the power of greed or what is called “acquisitiveness.” We are

constantly hearing ads to take advantage of this or that sale and purchase more things. When we grow older, we may wonder why we accumulated so much. And I don't think we would worry so much about tomorrow if we became involved in helping those in need, seeking support and prayers from others and trusting Jesus who does not call us to escape the world but not to be enticed by it.

Anthony was described as a "man of spiritual wisdom, whose disciplined pursuit of holiness was always directed toward the better service of God." By the way, life in the desert must have agreed with him, Anthony died in the year 356 at the age of 105.

Prayer: *O God, by your Holy Spirit you called Anthony to renounce the world and to serve you in the solitude of the desert, withstanding the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil: Grant us grace to learn by his example to deny ourselves, to love you above all things, and, with pure hearts and minds, to follow you, the only God; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.*

(From *New Book of Festivals and Commemorations* by Philip Pfatteicher, p. 37)



Saturday January 18, 2020

Text: Matthew 16:13-19

Verse: **"He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?'"**

Today the church recognizes the "Confession of St. Peter." It was Peter who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Jesus responded by telling Peter what a blessing was bestowed, because Peter did not figure out Jesus' true identity by detective work, it was revealed to him by God the Father. We know that "Peter" was not the disciple's name, but a nickname given by Jesus. Simon is now the "Rock" and upon the solid rock of his revealed confession, the church will be built and withstand the forces of "Hades" or sin, death, and the devil. Although not in the latest hymnal I love the hymn *Onward, Christian Soldiers*, especially the lyrics "Gates of hell can never 'Gainst that Church prevail. We have Christ's own promise, and that cannot fail." The "rock" is not so much about Peter (Rocky) than about Jesus' promise to build a solid foundation for his church, his beloved brother and sisters. Daily the people of God face the temptation that the world is sin-bound and evil will ultimately triumph. So daily we must answer Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" Indeed he is the Son of the Living God, who gave his life as a sacrifice on the cross to de-throne evil with the power of love, and rose from the dead revealing the beginning of a new creation where sin and death will be no more.

Some have joked about Simon being called “Rock” for sometimes his faith seemed a bit rocky. We know that at Jesus’ arrest Simon denied with curses and oaths that he ever knew Jesus—a confession to save his own skin. But as we know from the gospel of Luke, Jesus told Simon he prayed for him and for his faith to be restored and therefore be a disciple strengthening others. And we know Jesus’ prayer had power, for after Pentecost Peter became a courageous follower of his Lord and Savior.

This day also begins the “Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.” The Holy Spirit guides the Church of Jesus toward greater unity. We share Peter’s confession as to who Jesus is. We pray for greater unity that together we can use all Spirit-endowed gifts to bring healing and hope to a hurting world.

Prayer: Almighty God, who inspired Simon Peter, first among the apostles, to confess Jesus as Messiah and Son of the living God: Keep your Church steadfast upon the rock of this faith, so that in unity and peace we may proclaim one truth and follow the one Lord, our Savior Jesus Christ: who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

