

Devotions for the Second Week after the Epiphany, January 19-23, 2025

Monday of Epiphany 2 – Prayer of the Week

Almighty and everlasting God, who governs all things in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the prayers of your people and grant us your peace through all our days; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

My passport says that I am a citizen of the United States. But my driver's license says that I am also a citizen of the state of Oregon and my deed on my house says that I am a citizen of the city of Portland. I suppose the local neighborhood association would also claim me. In one sense my various sorts of citizenship mean that I get the privilege of paying taxes. It also means that there are laws and the like which are supposed to protect me and make my life better. There are people who govern me, a president, a governor, a mayor. Sometimes they are people for whom I have voted, sometimes not. In truth, however, no matter who sits in those offices and signs the bills into law, my life doesn't change that much. I have never met a sitting governor. I suppose I have heard a few speeches on radio or television, but in truth, the various governors under whom I have lived have had little direct impact on my life.

We call upon the God who governs heaven and earth. That seems like a rather large job, certainly larger than the governor of a state or the president of our nation. Yet, we might wonder what exactly does a governor do? I think we often imagine God in that sort of a distant and far away role, many times removed from even the governor of my state. But reexamine my assumptions about governors above. It is true, I have not had much personal experience with the governor, but I benefit daily from the government of my state. I drive on roads, I pass by schools, some of which my children attended. I live near an airport where planes safely land. Those planes can take me anywhere in the world. I am protected by police and firemen. The avarice of my fellow man is curtailed by the laws which businesses and individuals must follow. I am blessed every day by government. I interact with it all the time.

In truth, the institutions of government, police, schools, road building, and so much more are part of God's left-hand kingdom. Whether she acknowledges it or not, our governor is part of that governance. Through such people God answers this prayer, either granting us the temporal peace we ask for or granting us peace of another sort when conflict rends our world. Pray for your governor and the rest of those who exercise authority in this world. Pray that God uses them to bring the peace we all crave. And pray they fix the pothole in the street in front of my house and the one that is probably in front of your house too. And then delight in the governance of God in your life, who exercises his authority in a wholly larger and more important kingdom in which He forgives your sins.

Tuesday of Epiphany 2 – Isaiah 49:1-7

¹ Listen to me, O coastlands,
and give attention, you peoples from afar.

The LORD called me from the womb,
from the body of my mother he named my name.
² He made my mouth like a sharp sword;
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me a polished arrow;
in his quiver he hid me away.
³ And he said to me, “You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified.”
⁴ But I said, “I have labored in vain;
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;
yet surely my right is with the LORD,
and my recompense with my God.”
⁵ And now the LORD says,
he who formed me from the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him;
and that Israel might be gathered to him—
for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD,
and my God has become my strength—
⁶ he says:
“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to bring back the preserved of Israel;
I will make you as a light for the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”
⁷ Thus says the LORD,
the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One,
to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation,
the servant of rulers:
“Kings shall see and arise;
princes, and they shall prostrate themselves;
because of the LORD, who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”

Keith walked through the empty rooms and wept. He had attended this parochial school when he was a child. He had served on the school board, the board of Elders, the church council, and most other opportunities the parish afforded him to serve. He had painted walls, replaced broken door handles, fixed a few toilets, and even crawled up the ladder to string lights for the backdrop of the school play once. Now it was closing. Children would not laugh and learn in this place, at least not at the parochial school. Even the Sunday School which used it on weekends was getting small.

Keith felt like the prophet in verse 4 above. He felt like he had labored in vain and spent his strength for nothing. It was not true. The children who had learned in that place and under his leadership and service were blessed for their time in those classrooms. But it was also true that the school would not be open this fall.

Did you hear what God said to the prophet, and to Keith, and to you in this reading today? There are a lot of people in Christianity today who feel a little like Keith. They see churches with far too many pews for the few folks who show up on Sunday. They remember when those seats were all full. And they feel like they have labored in vain. God invited the prophet and his discouraged people long ago to see God's even larger mission. God declared it was a too small a thing for them to rescue the exiled people of old. The whole world would know the salvation of God and be bathed in His light.

While we may be engaged in the kingdom's work when we serve a congregation and its ministries, the truth is that our ministry is not the whole kingdom of God. My friend Keith ended up being called to new service in God's kingdom, work which involved that building, empty no more. Today far more lives are being touched by that ministry than the children whom the parochial school taught. God's response to our discouragement is to expand the scope of our call and ministry. If you are grieving the loss of something. Be ready for God to open your eyes to something new that he will do through you.

Wednesday of Epiphany 2 – Psalm 40:1-11

¹ I waited patiently for the LORD;

he inclined to me and heard my cry.

² He drew me up from the pit of destruction,

out of the miry bog,

and set my feet upon a rock,

making my steps secure.

³ He 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.

⁴ Blessed is the man who makes

the LORD his trust,

who does not turn to the proud,

to those who go astray after a lie!

⁵ You have multiplied, O LORD my God,

your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us;

none can compare with you!

I will proclaim and tell of them,

yet they are more than can be told.

⁶ In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted,
but you have given me an open ear.
Burnt offering and sin offering
you have not required.

⁷ Then I said, “Behold, I have come;
in the scroll of the book it is written of me:

⁸ I delight to do your will, O my God;
your law is within my heart.”

⁹ I have told the glad news of deliverance
in the great congregation;
behold, I have not restrained my lips,
as you know, O LORD.

¹⁰ I have not hidden your deliverance within my heart;
I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation;
I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness
from the great congregation.

¹¹ As for you, O LORD, you will not restrain
your mercy from me;
your steadfast love and your faithfulness will
ever preserve me!

She always had a smile for me when I came to visit. Her body was twisted by her disease, she could not really walk any more. Her once expansive world was shrinking to the window from which she gazed, letters and emails received, and the phone calls of those who remembered her. But her world was growing at an amazing rate as well as she read her Bible, perhaps for the first time with this intensity. These words had taken on new meaning for her.

I think of her when I read these words. David speaks of waiting patiently for God to lift him up and set his feet on solid ground once more, to make his steps secure once more. She was looking forward to that blessing from God. He would not disappoint her. She would sing His praises in the assembly and her voice would quaver no more. She would speak of His faithfulness and salvation, standing on legs which were strong and steady. She would proclaim His blessings to the congregation of all humanity who are raised on that great day. She would have a song to sing, and she anticipated it.

David says that God does not delight in sacrifice and offering; rather, he gives to David and us his open ear. He loves our prayers. He loved hearing her prayers as she sat in that room with her Bible open on her lap, yearning for God’s healing and health. She waited patiently and then God answered all her prayers. Praise the Lord. We did on the day of her funeral.

Thursday of Epiphany 2 – I Corinthians 1:1-9

¹ Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes,

² To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— ⁶ even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸ who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

It all blew up in his face. He had hatched a plan to deal with this trouble-making preacher, this Saul of Tarsus who called himself Paul now. They would let the Romans do their dirty work. They would accuse him before the governor of the province and all they would have to do would be to sit back and watch the imperial machinery grind him up. The whole synagogue agreed to his plan and elected him leader of the congregation. They needed a new leader after their old one, Crispus, had abandoned them to follow Paul. That really hurt.

But on the big day, when they made their charges against Paul before Gallio the governor, it went horribly wrong. Gallio threw the case out and then expelled the whole delegation from the synagogue out into the street. Humiliated, the congregation turned on their newly elected synagogue ruler and beat him up in front of the courthouse. The governor simply shook his head and did nothing.

When it was all done and he was lying bloodied, bruised, and in the dust of Corinth's foul streets, a shadow fell over him and a familiar voice said, "Come on, Sosthenes, let's get you out of here and get you cleaned up." It was not any of his friends from the synagogue. No, it was far worse. His benefactor was Paul, the very man he had tried to kill a moment ago. Paul stood there, holding out his hand to him.

I imagined and made up the third paragraph, but the first two are true. You can read about these events in Acts 18:5-17. But I think the third paragraph happened, or something like it because we have the first verse of this reading in I Corinthians. Did you catch that last part of the verse. Paul says the letter is from two people. Himself and his brother, Sosthenes. He calls Sosthenes, the synagogue ruler who once tried to kill Paul, "our brother." Paul wrote these words to the congregation in Corinth which was riven by conflict. Did he put his arm around the man who tried to kill him and call him a brother because Jesus can change everything? I think so. I think Paul wanted his Corinthian friends to know that Jesus is our peace (Eph. 2:14) and real reconciliation between enemies is possible (II Cor. 5:16-19). Does your parish know some conflict? Many do. Jesus offers you real peace in Him. It starts with humbly confessing your

owns sins, as Paul did. It goes from there to a large-hearted forgiveness and love which is the very fabric of Christian fellowship.

Friday of Epiphany 2 – John 1:29-42a

²⁹ The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰ This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.’ ³¹ I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.” ³² And John bore witness: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. ³³ I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ ³⁴ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.”

³⁵ The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶ and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God!” ³⁷ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸ Jesus turned and saw them following and said to them, “What are you seeking?” And they said to him, “Rabbi” (which means Teacher), “where are you staying?” ³⁹ He said to them, “Come and you will see.” So they came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour. ⁴⁰ One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. ⁴¹ He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which means Christ). ⁴² He brought him to Jesus.

She stood out from her classmates. Her luxurious black hair and liquid brown eyes set her apart from her predominantly blue-eyed and blond-haired classmates. Her name also stood out. Its unusual use of the letters j, m, and r meant many stumbled when they spoke her name. Her parents had come from India and raised their daughter in a culturally Indian home. From their days in India, they had heard that Christian schools were some of the best, so they enrolled their little girl in the local Lutheran parochial school.

Even though she stood out, she was also one little girl in a sea of very Teutonic faces. She could not be asked to represent all Indian culture, yet, how would this become her classroom too? Her teacher wondered how to do this. Soon a meeting took place with the parents. The teacher asked the most important question of all, “What are you looking for?” Later those Indian parents would say that this question was incredibly moving for them. Someone had seen their struggle to fit into a strange world and was asking what they wanted for their beloved little girl.

Did you hear Jesus ask that question of the men He found following Him one day? On multiple occasions you might see that Jesus responds to various people who have answered Jesus' question here. A woman will say, “Give me this water,” in chapter 4. His response to her, challenging her life and calling her faith is the water of life she sought. The people of Capernaum will say, “Give us this bread you speak of,” in chapter 6. His long discourse which follows was as Peter later confessed, “the words of eternal life.”

Jesus has not come to impose his solutions on you either. He really listens to your prayers and wants to hear what you want. He has been a little boy in a village. He has been surrounded by grownups and has gone to work for the first time. He has stood on a boat that rocked and he has yearned for the rain when it was hot and dry. He turns and looks at you today and asks, “What are you seeking?” He really wants you to answer that question and tell Him.