

Devotions for the Fourth Week after the Epiphany, January 30- February 3, 2023

Monday of Epiphany 4 – Prayer of the Week

Almighty God, You know we live in the midst of so many dangers that in our frailty we cannot stand upright. Grant strength and protection to support us in all dangers and carry us through all temptation; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Imagine technology was able to give you a radically improved vision. Not just restoration of your youthful 20/20 vision, but the ability to see a hundred times better, a thousand times better. You could read a menu from half a mile away. Or what if you were given something like superman's x-ray vision or the ability to see through walls or in complete darkness. Whenever such discussions come up, we start to get nervous. We start to imagine how someone who had such vision would use to spy on me or to take advantage of me. What we almost never critically examine is how I might use that power to take advantage of other people. We are afraid of what others will do with power, but not what power will do to us.

We often have an enormous blind spot when it comes to seeing ourselves. I am susceptible to this too. Did you catch the little surprise in this prayer? We pray for support in danger, but that God would carry us through temptation. I think most of us, me included, would have reversed that prayer. We almost always imagine that we can resist a temptation but danger, the physical threat of death or the like, then we need God to carry us. We tend to think of God as a superman like character who swoops in and lifts us out of the bus about to explode. But the prayer reverses this because the author of this prayer is wise. He or she had a far more clear-eyed picture of me and you. Danger comes, we will need God's support in days of danger. But temptation will overwhelm us and sweep us away unless he carries us.

It is a hard thing to admit limitations and frailty. Your enemy, the Devil, works on that blind spot you have, that false sense of your own capacity and ability. Pray this prayer with intent and the frank admission that you are indeed crippled and bent over by your frailty. You are in the middle of dangers which you may not even be aware of. Jesus is aware of them. He has run this human race with you. Count on Him to hear and answer this prayer.

Tuesday of Epiphany 4 – Micah 6:1-8

¹ Hear what the LORD says:

Arise, plead your case before the mountains,
and let the hills hear your voice.

² Hear, you mountains, the indictment of the LORD,
and you enduring foundations of the earth,
for the LORD has an indictment against his people,
and he will contend with Israel.

³ “O my people, what have I done to you?
How have I wearied you? Answer me!
⁴ For I brought you up from the land of Egypt
and redeemed you from the house of slavery,
and I sent before you Moses,
Aaron, and Miriam.
⁵ O my people, remember what Balak king of Moab devised,
and what Balaam the son of Beor answered him,
and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal,
that you may know the righteous acts of the LORD.”
⁶ “With what shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
⁷ Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”
⁸ He has told you, O man, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

I had not asked for much of him, just an announcement of an event we were hosting at the big gathering at which he was presiding. It was a simple thing really. He promised to do it. He forgot, and the opportunity was lost. There was a moment when it would have been good, but now that moment was past. I was disappointed and angry with him. But what could he do? Micah imagines a much more significant issue than this. He speaks of the people of Israel who seem to have simply forgotten what God has done for them, the great rescue he worked in the days of Moses. Micah asks what gift he can bring to make it right. There is nothing. A thousand rams, rivers of oil, even the horror of a first-born sacrifice, like Isaac on Mt. Moriah, even that is not enough.

So, what can I do with a man like the one who disappointed me. There is no way for him to make it right. His lame apology is just that, an apology, not restitution. What can God do with us? The final verse guides me and speaks to all of us. God did not ask us to pay the price. My first-born son as a sacrifice would make no difference for my sin, just as a river of oil or a thousand rams offered on an altar would change nothing. Only God could change that reality, and it came at the price of His first-born Son. Now that God has made it right, He asks us simply for the humility to walk with Him in doing justice and loving kindness. My good deed done, my life lived, my good work is no longer purchasing anything. It is simply living out the truth that God loves me.

By Christ's gift of Himself, I am now freed from the scale-balancing and fruitless effort of keeping score with this man who disappointed me. Christ has died for that sin and my many sins

as well. He cannot turn back the clock and I cannot expect him to. Together we can do the right thing right now. We can love kindness and walk together humbly before the God who died for us both.

Wednesday of Epiphany 4 – Psalm 15

¹ O LORD, who shall sojourn in your tent?
Who shall dwell on your holy hill?
² He who walks blamelessly and does what is right
and speaks truth in his heart;
³ who does not slander with his tongue
and does no evil to his neighbor,
nor takes up a reproach against his friend;
⁴ in whose eyes a vile person is despised,
but who honors those who fear the LORD;
who swears to his own hurt and does not change;
⁵ who does not put out his money at interest
and does not take a bribe against the innocent.
He who does these things shall never be moved.

The subpoena had been delivered to his office. He knew what it was about. He would have to testify. The company had skirted the law, perhaps transgressed it on occasion, and now he would have to testify about it. He could plausibly deny that he knew anything about it. After all, he wasn't the one who had made the decisions, but he was in the room when they were made. He knew about them. He had long known about them

What would happen to him if he spoke the truth? It would surely be unpleasant. He and people he had known and called friends would likely be convicted of crimes. He would never be able to work in the field again. Fines would be levied. A stint in jail might be required of him. He might lose the home he loved. Would his wife stay with him? All these scenarios ran through his mind as he sat there looking at the letter from the court, telling him which day and in which room he would submit his testimony.

“O Lord, who shall sojourn in your tent?” David asks in the first verse of this psalm. “Who shall dwell on your holy hill?” At the end of verse four he speaks of a man or woman who swears to his own hurt and does not change his story. When he or she appears in court the truth is told, even when it harms the one who bears the witness. The psalmist speaks pointedly to our age when the truth has too often become a matter of opinion, malleable and changeable according to the needs and circumstances of the speaker. This infects politics, classrooms (the amount of plagiarism and cheating in classrooms is very disturbing), and almost every facet of our experience. But God does not change and the truth, the honest-to-God truth, does not change either. The sooner you realize that the better.

Thursday of Epiphany 4 – I Corinthians 1:18-31

¹⁸ For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,

and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

²⁶ For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

In his novel *The Hammer of God*, Bo Giertz begins with a story of a young pastor who has recently been graduated from the seminary. He is filled with all the latest scholarship but little of God's wisdom. On a terrible night, when a man lay dying and in mortal fear for his soul, his lack of wisdom would be exposed. The man kept repeating that he was a sinner, damned to hell, and the young pastor had nothing to say to him. God sent that night a pious woman, a true believer, who spoke the strange wisdom of God to the dying man. Yes, the man's sins were great, but the forgiveness of God in Christ is greater still.

Paul is noting something very important here, something which professors such as myself dare not ever forget. God's wisdom is wiser than us and he often shows it in the lowliest of folk, to the shame and humiliation of the learned. It appears that some in Paul's day struggled with this as we continue to struggle with this. His congregation probably had a greater intellectual diversity than your parish does. First Christian Church in Corinth probably included some who were well read and many others who could not read at all, slaves and women were rarely educated in those days. Yet, as Paul, who was very well educated, notices, God's wisdom is poured out into the lowly and the weak. Had Paul stood in awe at the faith of a humble slave? Have you ever stood in awe before the faith of a developmentally delayed person? God uses these weak and humble folk to shame the ones the world and our eyes might see as lofty and well educated, upon whom we bestow degrees and titles and honors.

I am glad of my degrees and the learning which I have received. I do not turn my back upon such things, but I also have come to recognize the men and women of humble means who pray better than I do, who often see the Kingdom of God with greater clarity and acuity than I can see.

Knowledge is a good thing, Paul also thanks God for knowledge just a few verses prior to this (I Cor. 1:5). But it is always in service to the One who is wiser than all of us put together, who is stronger than our mightiest engines of war, and who created us all from nothing. Our boast, whatever it may be, is a boast in the Lord. In Giertz's novel, which I commend to you, the pastor goes on from his shame that night to embrace the wisdom of God he learned best from this humble woman of faith.

Friday of Epiphany 4 – Matthew 5:1-12

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him.

² And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

⁵ “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

⁶ “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

⁷ “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

⁸ “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

⁹ “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

¹⁰ “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

In 2006 I had the privilege of teaching for a few days in India. Another time I taught a small group of men who were preparing for ministry in Kyrgyzstan. I have worked with people from Ethiopia and the Sudan. I have also had the privilege of getting to know fellow pastors and other servants of Christ from Spanish speaking parts of the world. God has richly blessed me in ministry. When I think back on so many of these fellow Christians, I am struck by how many of them have struggled and been persecuted in ways I have never experienced. I suppose that makes mine a first world Christianity. I cannot change that, but I can praise God and admire what He has done in others.

My friends know far better than I do what Christ means when He speaks of being reviled, persecuted, and slandered. I believe I would simply wilt before what these Christians have faced for Jesus' sake. One watched his cousin crucified by Islamic militia men. Some have fled for their lives. What consistently struck me, when I have been with suffering Christians, is their

great joy. Despite being oppressed, they are excited about Jesus and His kingdom. They did not see the persecution as a great tragedy but as a sign of their participation in the kingdom of Jesus.

Jesus says to us today that we are blessed when we are persecuted. From the comfort of my North American Christianity, I have a hard time seeing that. But I do believe that Jesus has led these fellow Christians into my life because I need to see their joy and to believe that the same Jesus who has sustained and blessed them in their days of trial has made the same promise to me. I surely would fail in the day of trial, but He will not, and because He does not, I too shall stand firm. All my friends from persecuted communities tell me it is not they who are strong. It is Jesus. He blesses on the day of persecution too.