

Second Sunday After Christmas

Old Testament Lesson: 1 Kings 3: 4-15

Solomon has just been made king upon the orders of King David, who is on his **death** bed, because Solomon's step brother, **Adonijah**, had organized a campaign to steal the kingship from him. After dealing with matters left over from King David's reign, King Solomon heads to **Gibeon** (where the tabernacle was located)—(**1 Chron. 21:29**)— to offer **sacrifices of thanksgiving** to the Lord. While there, the Lord appears to King Solomon in a **dream**, offering to give King Solomon **whatever** he asked. In other words, it was a **blank check**. Under the circumstances, for what would **you** have asked? Perhaps surprisingly, before King Solomon answers, he explains to God that from a child he has observed closely the **faith and uprightness** of his father as he went about his duties. Because, King Solomon notes, he is still young and inexperienced, he would like **understanding and discernment**, so that he can judge God's people according to **God's** will.

God is so **pleased** by King Solomon's answer that he not only grants King Solomon's request, but in **addition** gives him what he could have but **didn't** ask for: **riches and honor** beyond that of any contemporary. Then God announces a conditional blessing: **If** King Solomon serves God all the days of his life, **then** God will also grant him a **longer life**.

When King Solomon returns to Jerusalem, he stands before the **Ark of the Covenant**, which David had placed in a tent there some years earlier, again offering **sacrifices of peace** to the Lord, a kind of sacrifice which allowed him to invite all his servants to a **feast** featuring the meat of the sacrifice.

Epistle Lesson: Ephesians 1: 3-14

As St. Paul begins this letter to his Christian converts in Ephesus, he is overwhelmed with **joy** as he details the **love** that God has shown them (and **us**). What are some of these details?

- God has blessed us in Christ with **every** spiritual blessing.
- He **chose** us and planned to redeem us **before** the creation of the world.

- Through Jesus' sacrifice, our sins are **forgiven** and our **adoption** as God's Children is assured.
- God has revealed to us the **mystery** that through Christ we and all things in heaven and on earth are **united** in Him.
- As **Children of God**, we share in **Christ's inheritance**, per God's original plan.
- The Holy Spirit is the **guarantee** of our inheritance.

(Now think about that! God knew that **if** he created humankind, humankind would **sin** and need a redeemer. That redemption would require His **only** Son to die. At this point, God had a choice: He could **proceed** with the creation of man, at the expense of the life of His Son; or He could **abandon** that initial plan and create something else. Can you now appreciate how **much** God loves His creation of humankind?). Do we have a great God, or what?!)

Gospel Lesson: Luke 2: 40-52

It is **Passover** time, a time when every adult male Jew is **required** by God to appear before Him at the appointed place. At 12 years of age, Jesus might also be considered an adult, to accompany his parents to Jerusalem. The **Feast of Unleavened Bread**, which immediately followed Passover, lasted a week. Since there was much **celebration** at that time, and large crowds from every city and village were there, it would not be surprising that Joseph and Mary would assume Jesus would stay within the village group and join the group for **home** at the appointed time. Now, Nazareth is at least **100 miles** from Jerusalem, and mountains intervene. So this is going to be a several-day hike. Furthermore, people traveled in groups for **safety** reasons. So after the group had traveled for one day and Joseph and Mary discovered that Jesus was **missing**, they were now **on their own** while trying to find Jesus. And four days later they find Him, in the **temple** with the **teachers**, demonstrating to them a more **thorough** understanding of His Word than the teachers could ever have imagined.

We as parents can understand the distress of Joseph and Mary. Still, we might wonder whether they **really** understood that they were dealing with a sinless human being who **already** was about the mission on which His Father had sent Him. His actions certainly met with the Father's favor. And as a human being with untainted genetics, He must have stood out above his brethren in wisdom and stature.

The Baptism of Our Lord

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 43: 1-7

Isaiah was the one of the prophets that God chose to speak to the peoples of the **Southern** Kingdom, or **Judah**, over the time period preceding and following the collapse and disappearance of the **Northern** Kingdom, from around 740 to 695 B.C. His ministry was to call the people to **repentance** and to assure them of God's **faithfulness** in keeping His **promise** to give to them—and **all** mankind—a savior.

Here, in today's reading, God addresses **Jacob**, and he addresses **Israel**, pointing out that he has **redeemed** them, called them by **name**, is being **with** them wherever they go, and is giving nations as a **ransom** for them because they are precious, honored, and loved in his sight. Then God says that he will bring their **offspring** from afar: from east, west, north, and south, even from the ends of the earth. He will bring to himself **everyone** who is **called by his name** whom he had created for his glory.

But who **are** the offspring of Jacob, or Israel? Obviously, they would also be the descendants of **Abraham** as well. And in **Galatians 3:29**, St. Paul makes it **very** clear that **whoever** belongs to **Christ** through faith is a descendant of Abraham. We must conclude, then, that in this reading, Isaiah is prophesying of God calling **all** people to him through **faith** in his Son, Jesus Christ. And, as St. Peter stated in his Pentecostal Day sermon, **everyone** who calls upon the name of the Lord Jesus shall be saved! (**Acts 2:21**).

Epistle Lesson: Romans 6: 1-11

St. Paul apparently noticed **something** in the Roman Christians' behavior that prompted him to pose the question: if our sin is covered by God's grace, then can we **increase** God's grace by sinning **more**? Some people might call that concept a **convenient falsehood**. To help the Roman Christians understand this, St. Paul embarks on an **explanation** of what really happens when a person experiences water baptism into Christ Jesus.

First, that person is **buried** with Christ into His death (remember that Jesus' death was the payment for all sin). Then, when Christ was **raised** from the dead, the baptized person is raised **also** into a **new** life. Picture this, then: **if** we have died with Christ, **then** as far as sin is concerned, we are **dead** to further sin. Instead, since we have been **raised with Christ** who lives for **God**, so we too have been raised with Christ to **live for God**. Instead of choosing to sin **again**, we have the **power** to choose **righteousness**. And this should not be a burden, as St. John tells us (**1 John 5:3-5**), because our faith **overcomes** the world. So we need to **adjust** our mindset: I **choose** to forego sin in order to walk in the way of **godliness**.

Gospel Lesson: Luke 3: 15-22

It was the expectation of every devout Jew that the Messiah would appear in his lifetime. Imagine, then, what these people were thinking when John the Baptist appeared on the scene, announcing that he was preparing the way for the **kingdom of heaven**, and that people needed to **repent** of their sins and be **baptized** in water to indicate that they **had** repented. Surely, they thought, **John the Baptist** must be the Messiah. But when they addressed this question to John, he responded with the following observations:

— I only baptize with **water**.

— The **One** who is coming, who is so **superior** to me that I am not worthy even to untie his sandals to wash his feet (the job of the lowest servant), will baptize with the **Holy Spirit** and with **fire** (probably meaning trials and tribulations to test one's faith).

— In addition, **He** is the one who will separate the **wheat** from the **chaff** (meaning identifying those who **believe** in him from those who do **not**) and burning the chaff in eternal flames.

But John had been **politically incorrect**. He had reproved **King Herod Antipas** because Herod had divorced his wife in order to marry his brother's wife, **Herodias** (Matthew **14: 1-12**), in addition to a lot of other evil. So, to **silence** God's messenger calling Herod to repent, Herod had John imprisoned. But before John was imprisoned, **Jesus** had come to him to be baptized in water. And when John baptized Jesus, the **Holy Spirit** descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove, and a **voice** from heaven declared that Jesus was his beloved Son, with whom he was well pleased.

Second Sunday After the Epiphany

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 62: 1-5

Isaiah was the one of the prophets that God chose to speak to the peoples of the **Southern** Kingdom, or **Judah**, over the time period preceding and following the collapse and disappearance of the **Northern** Kingdom, from around 740 to 695 B.C. His ministry was to call the people to **repentance** and to assure them of God's **faithfulness** in keeping His **promise** to give to them—and all mankind—a **savior**. But in today's reading, Isaiah is describing how Israel will **change** with the appearance of the Messiah.

- The Messiah will cause **righteousness and salvation** to appear to **all** nations because of the presence of his **redeemed**.
 - God will give Jerusalem a **new** name (see **Revelation 21:1-3**), and it will be a **crown of glory** for the Lord.
 - God's people will no longer be **despised** and **rejected**, but they will be God's **delight** whom he will take as his **bride**.
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Epistle Lesson: 1 Corinthians 12: 1-11

St. Paul was instrumental in establishing the church in Corinth as he neared the end of his **second** missionary journey. In this **first** letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul must deal with a lot of little (well, maybe **not** so little) problems that were fracturing the **unity** of the church there. Early on in this letter, St. Paul emphasized that he brought the Gospel to them with great **humility**, letting the **signs and wonders** worked by the **Holy Spirit** among them to convince them that **God** was in the message. In today's reading, he addresses the **nature** of their church services. In particular, he focuses on the various **manifestations** of the Holy Spirit in **power** among them as they worship God together. First of all, though, he points out that, no matter **which** spiritual gift one is manifesting, it is still prompted by the **same** spirit. Besides these gifts, one can show one's dedication to the Lord by serving others in various ways, or by engaging in various activities—all of which, of course, are **gifted** to each individual by God.

Then he explains what each **spiritual** gift is:

- Providing **wisdom** at a crucial point that is so unique that it could only have been provided by the whispering of the Holy Spirit.
- Providing **knowledge** of something that obviously was not learned.
- Manifesting **faith** for something that enables mountains to be moved, figuratively and literally.
- Healing** the sick as Jesus had commanded his disciples to do (**Luke 10:9**).
- Working a **miracle** under the direction of the Holy Spirit.
- Bringing a **message** from God to the people (one really **doesn't** have to be an ordained pastor or teacher to do this! Remember the disciples? Remember the Great Commission?)
- Being able to **speak another language** you haven't learned to someone who needs to hear the Gospel in his language (recall the day of Pentecost).
- Being able to **interpret languages** that one hasn't learned when the need is there.

These are the gifts provided by the **Holy Spirit** at **crucial** times in the life of the Church in order to **advance** the Gospel, and these are the gifts manifested by the **disciples** as they went from place to place, delivering the message of the Gospel with the **power** of the Holy Spirit. And these are the gifts that may be seen manifested in the **mission** fields today, as new Christians simply believe God. So why don't **we** see these gifts being manifested today? We have to remind ourselves that even Jesus could not do healings and miracles at times, because the people didn't **believe** (see **Matthew 13:58**)! Or, putting it in plain words, if you don't **believe** that God manifests these gifts of the Spirit, God is going to **honor** your **unbelief**.

So what are we to make of this? Namely that the Holy Spirit can use **anyone** to manifest these gifts but it certainly helps if we are willing to be used by God **and** believe that God is still interested in being a part of our daily lives in miraculous ways.

Gospel Lesson: John 2: 1-11

Jesus has just begun his ministry. He has been **baptized** by John in the waters of the Jordan River and, as he made his way from there to **Galilee**, he has been calling **disciples** to follow him. Today's reading finds Jesus in **Cana** of Galilee, where Jesus' mother has been invited to a **wedding**. Jesus and his disciples were invited as well. It seems as if there were **more** guests there than the bridegroom had expected because all of a sudden they were out of wine, a major **faux pas** in a Jewish wedding. Mary, Jesus' mother, must have learned along the way that Jesus had the **Spirit of God, and faith**, in him, so she quickly apprises him of the situation. Jesus politely reminds her that **she** does not control his ministry, the **Father** does. But Mary has **faith** in Jesus, and tells the servants to be prepared to do whatever he (a guest) tells them to do. And sure enough, Jesus soon instructs the servants to fill six 20-30 gallon jars (that's somewhere between 120 and 180 gallons!) with water, and take some to the **master of the feast** for testing. And when this happens, the feast master calls the **bridegroom** to remark that in marriage feasts, the **best** wine is served **first**, and then, after the taste buds are **dulled** somewhat, the **poorer** wine is served. But in this case, the best wine was served **after** the lower quality wine had been consumed. The poor bridegroom must have been **bewildered** by the circumstance, but can you imagine the **quality** of wine God is going to have for his people in heaven for the marriage of Jesus with his Church?

In any case, this was the first **miracle** that Jesus **publicly** performed as he began his ministry, a miracle that brought **glory** to God.

Third Sunday After the Epiphany

Old Testament Lesson: Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6 and 8-10

The Old Testament books of **Ezra** and **Nehemiah** recount the history of the Jews trying to **rebuild** the city of Jerusalem and its temple after their **return** from the Babylonian Captivity. Ezra the scribe has already led a group of Jews to Jerusalem to start the rebuild, but now, some years later, word reaches Nehemiah, the cupbearer to the Persian king **Artaxerxes I**, that the **walls** and the **gates** are still in complete disarray. When Nehemiah expresses his sadness about the situation to the King, the King appoints him **governor of Judah** and allows him to go to Jerusalem. There he leads the Jews in rebuilding the walls and installing the gates in just **52 days**, despite furious **opposition** from some sources. He is also required to deal with the problem of the rich Jews taking **advantage** of the poor Jews.

Now, as our reading begins, the people gather in front of one of the gates as Ezra the scribe reads to the people from the **Book of the Law of Moses**. And he does not **just** read it, but **explains** it so that the people **understand** what is being read. The people lift up their **hands** and bow their **heads** in **worship** of the Lord, at the same time **weeping** because they are made aware of their **sins** and the need to **repent**. Nehemiah and Ezra **reassure** the people of God's **forgiveness** as they tell the people that they should not mourn or weep, because this day has become **holy** to the Lord. Instead, they are to **celebrate** with **feasting**, because they now **understand** God's Word and realize that **the Lord is their strength!**

Epistle Lesson: 1 Corinthians 12: 12-31a

As we learned last week, St. Paul is trying to restore **order** to the worship services of the Corinthians. As we heard last week, he noted that the **Holy Spirit** gives **spiritual** gifts to individuals as the **Holy Spirit** decides. And although there are a multitude of such gifts, **each** of these gifts is manifested for the **common** good.

In today's reading, St. Paul proceeds to define more completely **how** a worship service involves the various members of the congregation working **together**, much in the way that the various parts of a **human** body work together to complete whatever task the body is given to do. Thus, just because one is not a doer of **miracles** does not mean that he is not a part of the congregation, much as an **ear** cannot be considered **not** to be a part of the body just because it cannot **speak**. In other words, just as a human body is made up of many parts that work **together** to form a unified body, so **each** member of a congregation contributes to the working of the congregation so that it makes **one** body in **Christ**. Contrariwise, some part of the body cannot claim that another part is **not** needed just because **that** part does not have some glorious or prominent role.

Finally, St. Paul provides a list of some of the **roles** that people might play within the body of Christ: **apostles, prophets, teachers**, workers of **miracles**, those who **heal** the sick, those who **help in administration** of whatever kind, and those who speak in **other languages, for example**. The point is, not **everyone** is blessed with **all** of the gifts or roles; in fact, someone may be blessed with only **one** gift or **one** role, but that does not make him or her any **less** a part of the body of Christ.

Gospel Lesson: Luke 4: 16-30

Jesus has been baptized by John in the river Jordan, immediately following which he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights, there to be **tempted** by the devil with every kind of temptation, three of which are recorded for us. Having **rejected** the devil's every temptation, Jesus has returned to Galilee to teach in the synagogues in **power** (e.g., **healing** people). As our reading begins today, we find Jesus in the synagogue in **Nazareth**, the city where he grew up. And when given a scroll of the book of **Isaiah** from which to read, he turns to the part that describes the ministry of the **Messiah**. Having read that section, Jesus then proclaims to the congregation that that prophecy has **now** been fulfilled! And although the congregation remarked on his nice words, they still **rejected** Jesus. Why? A couple of reasons. One, how could a **hometown** boy, raised up with them, turn out better and smarter than any of **them**? Second, why isn't Jesus doing the **miracles** upon **them** that he has been doing elsewhere? Jesus responds by telling them that because they **reject** him—in other words, have no **faith** in him—he can do **no** miracles in their midst. Then Jesus observes that it **always** has been this way, citing the examples of the **widow of Zarephath** whom God provided for during the famine pronounced by Elijah (**1 Kings 17: 8-16**), and the healing of the Syrian army commander, **Naaman, of leprosy** (**2 Kings 5: 1-14**), although the lepers in Israel were not healed. Why? Because **they** believed God and acted in **faith**, while the Children of Israel at the same time **refused** to believe God.

Jesus' observation is met with **rage** and **hate** by his unbelieving townsfolk, who drive him to the edge of the town to throw him off the cliff. But God ensures that Jesus will not be killed **before** his time, allowing Jesus to **pass through** the midst of the crowd unscathed.