

## Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany

### ***Old Testament Lesson: Jeremiah 1: 4-10 and 17-19***

God called Jeremiah to be His prophet when Jeremiah was still a **youth**, and he served in this capacity for over 40 years. His ministry began during the reign of King **Josiah**, the **Southern** Kingdom's most **righteous** king, who attempted to undo his grandfather's and father's introduction of every kind of **idolatry**, and to stimulate a **revival**. Unfortunately, the succeeding four kings were all **evil**, and they led the nation back **into idolatry**. This culminated in the Babylonian captivity. Jeremiah's ministry was to **support** King Josiah but to rebuke and **warn** the nation during the reigns of the last four kings.

Today's reading is a recounting of God **calling** Jeremiah to his ministry. As he does so, God tells Jeremiah that he had **consecrated** Jeremiah to this ministry of prophet even **before** he was in the womb. But Jeremiah objects, saying that he is only a **youth**, with little or no **speaking** experience. God, however, states that **he** will be with him wherever he sends him, and will give him the **words** to speak at that time. Therefore Jeremiah should **not** be afraid, because he (**God**) will be there to deliver him.

Then God touches Jeremiah's **mouth** and tells him that God's **words** are now in his mouth, and that he (God) has set Jeremiah over **nations and kingdoms** to determine their **destiny**. God then tells Jeremiah to dress and **get to work**, because he has made Jeremiah as strong as a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall against the **entire** land of Judah and **all** its officials and peoples. And even though they will **fight** against him, they will **not** prevail because God is with Jeremiah.

Thinking back to the Epistle Lesson of last week, do you now appreciate that God has a **role** and has equipped **every** person in the congregation for a specific job?

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**Epistle Lesson: 1 Corinthians 12: 31b - 13: 1-13**

Recalling St. Paul's instructions to the Corinthians from **last** week's Epistle Lesson on the role that **each** individual plays in a congregation, especially when it comes to the manifestation of spiritual **gifts**, or to the **role** that one plays in the congregation, we now find St. Paul saying that, as **important** as all of these are, there is something that is **more** important, in fact is **basic**, to the vibrant life of a congregation: **love!** And it is not the kind of popular relationship that passes for love today. Rather, it is **godly** love, that is, **sacrificial** love for the benefit of someone **else**. It is love for **love's** sake.

Then St. Paul states that manifestation of the **spiritual gifts**, or even **martyrdom**, is **nothing** if it is not done with that godly **love**. And although manifestation of spiritual gifts and martyrdom will eventually pass away, love will continue into **eternity** where there will be no need for the manifestation of spiritual gifts or for martyrdom. Instead, love will be **characterized** in **this** life by being **patient, kind, bearing** all things, **believing** all things, **hoping** for all things, and **enduring** all things; and **rejoicing** with the **truth**. On the other hand, love will **not** be characterized by being envious, boastful, arrogant, or rude; insisting on one's own way; being irritable or resentful; or rejoicing at wrongdoing.

So St. Paul notes that faith, hope, and love will abide forever. But the most important of the three is **love**.

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**Gospel Lesson: Luke 4: 31-44**

Having just escaped from the intents of his murderous **townsfolk**, as we learned from last week's gospel reading, Jesus makes his way to **Capernaum**, where he **again** teaches in the synagogue. This time, however, the people receive his words **favorably**, because it was clear that Jesus **knew** what he was talking about. But as he is teaching, a man in the congregation with the spirit of a **demon** raises his voice, the demon speaking **through** the man and identifying Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God. This demon also knows that Jesus will eventually **judge** the demons. Jesus does not need a **demon** to be the source of **that** truth, so he casts the demon out of the man with a word, the demon throwing the man to the ground and writhing before leaving the man. The congregation **immediately** recognizes that, not only is the man **healed**, but that Jesus speaks not only **knowledgeably** but with **power** and **authority**.

Afterward Jesus retires to the home of **Peter**, whose **mother-in-law** was there with a high **fever**. So Jesus **rebukes** the fever, and the fever leaves the woman, enabling her to be a **hostess** to Jesus and his disciples. But word has spread about what Jesus has **done** so far this day, so that by evening, all those in the area who were **sick** or who were troubled by **demons** were brought to Jesus, and he healed **all** the sick, and **silenced** the demons before casting them out.

The next day Jesus went to a desolate place for communion with his **Father**, but people followed him with their **needs**. So Jesus, having **compassion** on the people, taught the **good news** of the kingdom of God to them, and then went doing the same in **other** towns in Galilee as well as Judah.

## Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany

### *Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 6: 1-8 (9-13)*

Isaiah, as you will recall, was God's voice of warning of **judgment** to the **Southern** Kingdom, or **Judah**, around the time of the **Northern** Kingdom's demise around 720 B.C. In the earlier part of his ministry, in the year that King **Uzziah** died, Isaiah receives a **vision** from God. What do we know about King Uzziah? He was a **righteous** king, that is, for a time. But because God **blessed** his reign with increasing fame and power, King Uzziah became so **prideful** that God had to step in. And He did so by afflicting King Uzziah with **leprosy**, effectively ending his reign. Although the successor to the throne, King Uzziah's son **Jotham**, was a relatively righteous king, he was soon replaced by **his** son, King **Ahaz**, who led the nation into the **idolatry** more characteristic of the reign of King **Ahab** of the **Northern** Kingdom.

It is during the reign of King **Ahaz**, then, that the Lord gives Isaiah this vision of the **power and majesty** of God. Isaiah actually **sees** the **Lord** sitting on His **throne**, His train filling the temple, with **angels** above the Lord proclaiming the holiness and glory of God. Then the voice that calls out to Isaiah is so powerful that it causes the temple to **shake**. Remembering God's much earlier statement (**Exod. 33:20**) that whoever **sees** the face of God will **die**, Isaiah fears for the worst, because he realizes his sinfulness and in addition he is **seeing** the Lord. But an **angel** comes to Isaiah with a burning piece of coal with which he touches Isaiah's lips, and tells him that his sin and guilt are taken away. Immediately Isaiah hears the voice of God again, asking, "Who will go for us?" **Us?** Who is "**us?**" The same God whose **Spirit** hovered over the waters at the time of creation, who proposed, "Let **us** make man in **our** image, after **our** likeness." Without hesitation, one can say that this is the **only** God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to whom Isaiah answers, "**I** will go; send **me!**"

And **what** does God give Isaiah to say? He is to deliver God's **judgment** upon the people. When the Word of God is spoken, **spiritually** they will no longer **understand**, they will not **perceive**, their ears will become **deaf**, their eyes will become **blind**, and their hearts will no longer be able to be healed. Well, is that **fair** of God? Didn't God harden **Pharaoh's** heart as well (**Exod. 9:12**)? So how can God **blame** the people of Judah? How could he blame **Pharaoh**? Because,

after many ***overtures*** to the people of Judah, and to Pharaoh, they ***persistently*** made their decision to ***rebel*** against God. So finally God concludes that they have ***irrevocably*** made their choice, so he is ***letting*** them continue in that choice from now on. Undoubtedly feeling ***anguish*** over what is to happen to his people, Isaiah asks ***how long*** this judgment will last. And God responds with a ***prophecy*** of the Babylonian Captivity, at which time their cities and land will be laid ***waste***, and only a ***remnant*** (the seed of ***believers***) would remain to form a stump. And as a stump sends out new shoots, so ***this*** stump would send out new shoots, disciples of the ***Messiah***.

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## Epistle Lesson: 1 Corinthians 14: 12b - 20

St. Paul is continuing his instructions to the church in Corinth on how to maintain **order** during their church services. Apparently, the **spiritual gift** of speaking praises to God in a foreign language was a gift that **too many** wanted to use during the service. In this case, there appeared to be two **problems** with that: first of all, there was no **order** to what was happening; too many people were trying to speak at the **same** time instead of humbly **waiting** for that right moment. Secondly, St. Paul makes it clear that if one is to **manifest** the spiritual gift of speaking in a foreign language during the service, there must be someone there through whom the Holy Spirit manifests the spiritual gift of **interpreting** those words spoken in different foreign languages. After all, St. Paul points out, the church service is there for the **building up** of the rest of the church; and if nobody **understands** what is being said, obviously nobody is being **built up** in Christ. So instead, St. Paul advises, people should aspire to manifest the gift of **prophecy**, of speaking for God in one's **native** tongue, so that **everybody** can hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to the church.

Does this mean that God does **not want** believers to manifest such spiritual gifts during a church service? Absolutely **not!** That would be a quenching of the Spirit forbidden by God (**1 Thessalonians 5:19**). What he **does** want is an **orderly** conducting of the service that allows believers to **minister** to each other **through** the gifts of the Spirit. And **that** requires at least two things: first of all,

that people in the congregation are spiritually **mature** enough properly to use the gifts of the Spirit. And secondly, there must be sufficient **faith** within the congregation to recognize, appreciate, and **utilize** these gifts of the Spirit. As St. Paul points out later in this same chapter (**1 Corinthians 14:26-33**), God provides these spiritual gifts for a purpose: to **build up** the church, with **everyone** being an intimate part of that building-up process.

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**Gospel Lesson: Luke 5: 1-11**

Continuing from last Sunday St. Luke's recalling of the **early** ministry of Jesus, we find Jesus today by the **Sea of Galilee** (here referred to as the "lake of Gennesaret"). Because of the **crowd**, Jesus looks around and happens to find two **fishing** boats nearby, empty. After ascertaining whose one of them was, which turned out to be **Simon Peter's**, Jesus has him put out from the shore a bit so that when he speaks, his **voice** will carry better to the crowd.

After he **finishes** his teaching, Jesus asks Peter to go out into the **deep** part of the lake and drop down the nets to catch some fish. Peter notes that they have been fishing **all night** and have not caught a thing. But then he takes Jesus' advice, and sure enough, his crew catches so many fish that their nets start to **break**. So they signal their fishing partners to come out in their boat to help them, which they do. But now **both** boats are so full of fish that **both** of them start to **sink**. Peter, obviously concerned that he could **lose** life **and** boat, must have thought that God was **punishing** him. So he turns to Jesus to admit his sinfulness. Jesus' response? **Don't** be afraid; I am going to make you fishers of **men**. And so the three men, Peter, James, and John, the three partners, **give up** their careers as fishermen, and leave their boats to follow Jesus.

## Sixth Sunday After the Epiphany

### *Old Testament Lesson: Jeremiah 17: 5-8*

As you may recall, Jeremiah was God's messenger to the **Southern** Kingdom, or **Judah**, during the forty-plus years prior to its being carried off into Babylonian Captivity. God's messages through Jeremiah were calls to **repentance** from apostasy, warnings of **punishment** if not repentant, and promises of **restoration** to a repentant people.

In today's reading, Jeremiah is instructed by God to explain to the people of Judah the **consequences** of their **choice**, either to **not** serve God, or to **serve** God. As you will recall, God explained the consequences of such a choice through Moses to the Children of Israel as they wandered in the desert, and later through Joshua shortly before he died (see **Leviticus 26** and **Deuteronomy 28**, both of which list the blessings for **obedience** and the curses for **disobedience**; and **Joshua 23-24**), all of which are worthwhile readings.

In this case, God sums things up this way:

- If you choose to **trust in yourself**—your strength or your wiles, then you can be compared to a **shrub in the desert** that has parched ground and uninhabited salt land for a dwelling place.
- If, on the other hand, you choose to **trust in the Lord**, then you can be compared to a **tree planted by a never-ending stream of water**, whose roots will extend under the stream bed, thus never having any fear of heat or drought, and whose leaves will remain green and which will **not** fail to produce good fruit.

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**Epistle Lesson: 1 Corinthians 15: (1-11) 12-20**

As St. Paul finishes his **first** letter to the church in Corinth, he emphasizes the **basics of the gospel** that they are to retain if they wish to be **saved**:

- Jesus **died for our sins** in accordance with Old Testament prophecies.
- He was **buried and raised** from the dead, again in accordance with Old Testament prophecies.
- **Witnesses to Jesus' resurrection** include Peter, then the **remaining** apostles, then more than **500** believers, then **James** (Jesus' brother), and then St. Paul **himself**.

St. Paul acknowledges that he does **not** deserve to be called an **apostle**, since it was **he** who was such a dedicated **persecutor** of the early church. But it was by God's **grace** that he became an apostle, and by God's grace that he was able to preach the gospel to so many **Gentiles** despite his many trials.

Then St. Paul addresses an apparent **problem** of faith within the Corinthian church: some were proclaiming the belief of the **Sadducces**, that there is **no** resurrection of the dead. If that is the case, St. Paul points out, then **Jesus** could not have been raised from the dead. And if he has not been raised from the dead, then not only is a Christian faith **futile**, but then the apostles are **misrepresenting** God, because they would be proclaiming a resurrection that did **not** happen. Furthermore, if Christ has not been raised from the dead, then that would indicate that God had **not** accepted Jesus' death as **complete** punishment for our sins, so all we would have to look forward to after our death is **eternal punishment**.

But, affirms St. Paul, Christ **has** been raised from the dead, as the **first** to receive a **glorious** body designated for all believers.

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**Gospel Lesson: Luke 6: 17-26**

Since our reading of last week, Jesus has **healed** a man of (apparent) leprosy, **forgiven** a paralyzed man of his sins—thus healing him, **chosen** Matthew as a disciple, **asserting his authority** to the Pharisees about what is or is **not** sinful on a day of worship, and **healing** a man with a paralyzed right hand in a synagogue on a day of worship (*i.e.*, as far as God is concerned, **compassion** trumps **rules**). Then he went to a mountain, where he prayed **all night** before calling his disciples together and choosing from them twelve that he named as **apostles**.

As our reading for today begins, we find Jesus and his contingent coming down from the mountain and being greeted by a **large crowd** of people from as far away as Jerusalem and Judah, and also from the **Gentile** region of Tyre and Sidon, not only wanting to **hear** him but also wanting to be **cured** of their sicknesses and **freed** from their demons. In fact, there was so much **power of the Holy Spirit** emanating from Jesus that all people had to do to be healed was **touch** Jesus.

But Jesus also wanted to proclaim the Kingdom of Heaven, and he does so by identifying those who would be **blessed** by God:

- those **poor (in spirit)**, meaning those who recognize their need for God's spiritual intervention,
- those who **hunger**, meaning those seeking God, because God will fill them with good things,
- those who **weep** over their sins, for they will joy in God's forgiveness,
- and those who are **persecuted because of their faith in Jesus**, because they will receive such a great reward—like that of the prophets—in heaven that they will not only **rejoice** but will **leap for joy**.

On the other hand, Jesus identifies those who have only **woes** to look forward to in eternity:

- those who are **rich** (and focus on their riches), because that will be their **only** reward,
- those who are **full** (of every blessing on earth **without** compassionate sharing), because that will all be taken away in eternity,

- those who are having a **great time** now but ignoring the **needy** and their **own** faith, because in eternity they will mourn and weep over their short-sightedness, and
- those who are **applauded and recognized** by the world, because that puts them in the **same** class as false prophets.

## Seventh Sunday After the Epiphany

### *Old Testament Lesson: Genesis 45: 3-15*

We are all familiar with the story of **Joseph** and his coat of many colors that his father had given him because Joseph was the **first-born** of Jacob's favorite wife, **Rachel**. And we remember how Joseph had **dreams** that **irritated** his brothers to no end because they suggested that they would be **bowing down to him**. So his ten half-brothers sold him into slavery, whereupon he ended up in **Egypt**, subsequently ending up in prison, and then becoming **second in command** in Egypt because God gave him the ability to interpret **dreams**. The last recorded dreams that he interpreted were those of **Pharaoh**, which revealed the coming of seven years of **abundance** followed by seven years of severe **famine**. Consequently Pharaoh appoints Joseph as **ruler** over Egypt in order to obtain and store grain in the years of abundance in anticipation of the years of famine. This famine apparently affected most of the known world, because **Jacob** had to send the remaining brothers (with the exception of Benjamin) to Egypt to buy grain for themselves and for their flocks and herds. But Joseph's interrogation of his ten half-brothers, without their **recognizing** him, results in a plan that **forces** the ten to bring Benjamin on the next trip—that is, **if** they expected to buy any more food.

As our reading begins, we find that Joseph has finally **revealed** himself to the ten and Benjamin that he is Joseph. The ten brothers are **petrified**, because they realize that Joseph now has their **lives** in his hand. But Joseph reassures them, noting that he does **not** blame them for selling him into slavery. It was the plan of **God**, so that Joseph would be in Egypt in order to interpret **dreams** for some of Pharaoh's officials as well as Pharaoh himself, thus allowing God to make it possible to save a **remnant** of the world from starving **despite** the famine. Then he orders his brothers to bring his father **Jacob** and all that they have to Egypt so that they can dwell in the **richest** part of Egypt, where Joseph will take care of them, because now he is the second-in-command in Egypt.

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**Epistle Lesson: 1 Corinthians 15: 21-26 and 30-42**

St. Paul is continuing his discussion with the Corinthian church about the **resurrection of the dead**. He first notes that **death** came by a man, **Adam**, but by the same token, the **resurrection** of the dead came by another man, **Jesus**, referred to later (1 Corinthians 15:47) as the **Second, or Last, Adam**. The **order**, then, in which believers are raised to life again is Jesus, the first-fruits; then, when he comes again, **all** who belong to Christ (believers from both the Old and New Testament periods). After that the **end** will happen, during which Jesus will **destroy** every other rule, authority, and power as well as **death**, and then he will deliver the kingdom to God the **Father**.

But since this kind of end is coming, St. Paul **chastises** the Corinthians for **continuing** to sin, especially by assuming that if they are going to die without any hope of a resurrection, they might as well **eat, drink, and be merry now!** St. Paul is saying in so many words that they should **not** get drunk with the **pleasures** of life when **others** need the **gospel** preached to them.

Then St. Paul addresses another issue of contention within the Corinthian church: what kind of resurrection **body** will they have? St. Paul says that such speculation is foolish, since that kind of thinking does not recognize the fact that a **seed** has to die in the ground before it grows into a fruitful plant. Likewise, when we die, God will give us a **far** more glorious body. Furthermore, because human “seed” is different from animal, bird, fish, sun, moon, or star “seed,” so likewise each **kind** of body will be given a different one with its own special **glory**.

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**Gospel Lesson: Luke 6: 27-38**

The reading for today continues the story of Jesus teaching a large crowd from all over the region. We remember from last week his recounting of the **blessings** accruing to those trusting in Jesus, and the **woes** accruing to those who are infatuated with **themselves**.

Today Jesus provides more specifics on how God expects us to **interact** with our fellow man. He starts out by saying that we must **love our enemies**, do good to those who **hate** us, pray for those who **abuse** us, and bless those who **curse** us. Now, in this day and age, that just doesn't seem **right**. Nevertheless, that is what God **expects**, because we are to be an example of **godly** behavior at all times, doing to or for **others** what we would want them to do to or for **us**.

But then Jesus defines the **love** about which he is talking. It is **sacrificial** love for the benefit of someone **else**. That is **not** the type of thinking that goes on in the **world**. But **God** is kind to the ungrateful and evil, so we as his **children** are to be merciful to others, expecting nothing in return.

Finally, Jesus tells us not to **judge or condemn** others (after all, we don't know the whole story), because God will judge or condemn us using that **same** approach. On the other hand, we should **forgive** others, and **give** to those **truly** in need, because God will forgive us and give back to us using that **same** approach, but he will do it for us with **abundance**.