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, in celebration.

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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. (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 cost 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?)

—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.

Do we have a great ***God***, or what?!

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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 **(Deuteronomy 16:16-17).** 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.

Epiphany of Our Lord

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 60: 1-6

Although many of Isaiah's messages from God to the ***Southern*** Kingdom, or ***Judah***, were admonitions to ***repent***, today's message is one foretelling the lavishing of God's ***love and grace*** not only on the people of Judah but also upon ***all*** nations. To a world enshrouded in darkness, God will appear before it in His ***glory.*** As God is being ***revealed***, kings and nations—even from afar, will come to Him in ***faith***, bringing the ***praises*** of God in addition to their offerings of gold and frankincense.

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Epistle Lesson: Ephesians 3: 1-12

In the beginning of his letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul mentioned the ***mystery*** that God had revealed to us through Jesus Christ. In today's lesson, St. Paul expands on the ***nature*** of that mystery. Recall that the common-held belief of the Jews of that time was that they were God's ***chosen*** people, and the ***only*** people that God had ***ever*** planned to save. Now St. Paul states that God had to give him a ***revelation*** in order for him to appreciate the ***mystery*** of Jesus the Messiah: that God intended right from the ***beginning*** to save ***all*** peoples, the ***Gentiles*** being ***fellow heirs*** and ***members of the same body*** and ***partakers of the same promise*** in Jesus the Messiah that had been held by the Jews to be theirs ***exclusively.*** Even though God had made ***clear*** in his promise to Abraham that he would be the (faith) father of ***all*** nations, this message being ***repeated*** by prophet after prophet, the ***reality*** of this statement was never appreciated until the gospel (good news) of Christ Jesus was ***revealed***. It was to the proclamation of this ***mystery*** that St. Paul was called in order to ***reveal it to the Gentiles.*** And through this combined (Jew and Gentile) body of believers, the wisdom of God to save ***all of humankind*** would be made known to the entire universe.

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Gospel Lesson: Matthew 2: 1-12

St. Matthew records for our benefit the ***revealing of the Messiah*** to the ***Gentiles.*** It starts with a reminder that Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judah during the reign of ***Herod the Great.*** You remember him: the king who was so ***paranoid*** that someone would replace him that he murdered ***anyone*** about whom he had ***any*** suspicion, including his own wife, some of his sons, and a number of other relatives. So when ***"wise men"***—which could mean astrologers, but could also mean (in our language) professors or researchers—from the east (which could mean Babylon or Persia, or any country east of there) came, claiming they saw the ***star*** of the new king of the Jews rise (were they remembering the prophecy that God put in Balaam's mouth: **A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.—Num. 24:17**), King Herod's paranoia went into hyperdrive. First of all, he ascertains ***where*** the Messiah is to be born. Amazingly, the Jewish leaders know ***exactly*** where, quoting **Micah 5:2.** Then Herod schemes to have the wise men find that new king and reveal ***that*** to him so that ***he*** can worship him individually (wink, wink).

Lo and behold, the star that had led them ***west*** now leads the wise men ***south*** to Bethlehem and to the exact ***home*** where Jesus is (remember, approximately ***two years*** have elapsed since Jesus was born; and apparently Joseph set up shop in Bethlehem after Jesus' birth).

Notice too that these wise men regard Jesus as more than an ordinary king, since they bow down to ***worship*** him, offering costly gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, something that is done only to ***deity***. Thus, by employing a new star, God ***revealed*** His Messiah to the ***Gentiles***. And God ***continued*** His intervention by directing the wise men ***not*** to return to Herod but to return home by a ***different*** route.

Second Sunday After The Epiphany

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 49: 1-7

In today's lesson, God speaks a ***prophecy*** through Isaiah, his prophet to the ***Southern*** Kingdom around the time of the ***Northern*** Kingdom's ***dispersion*** into the rest of the world. In this case, the voice is not that of the ***Father***, but of the pre-incarnate ***Jesus***, who calls out to ***all*** of the people of the world. He notes that God the Father called Isaiah to his ministry and ***named*** him while he was still in the womb, gave him a sharp ***sword*** for a mouth (a similar description of Jesus is found throughout the book of **Revelation** (*e.g.* **Revelation 1:16**), and in **Hebrews 4:12**, and which means that ***his*** Word will be victorious), and appointed ***him*** to accomplish what the Children of Israel ***failed*** to do—carry God's message of salvation to the ***rest*** of the world. But then the Messiah ***laments*** that Isaiah's work to bring the ***nation of Israel*** back to God has resulted in a ***rejection*** by these people; nevertheless he notes that ***despite*** this, God will reward Isaiah.

But now the Messiah notes that God honors and strengthens ***him*** by saying that his mission to restore the Children of Israel was too ***small*** of a mission. Rather, his mission is to be a Savior to ***all*** the peoples of the world. And ***despite*** the Messiah being ***despised*** by his ***own*** people, even kings and princes from the ***rest*** of the world will acknowledge ***him*** as Lord and Savior because he has been chosen by God the Father to be the Savior of ***every*** man.

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Epistle Lesson: 1 Corinthians 1: 1-9

In this ***first*** letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul confirms what Isaiah recorded in the prophecy just read as our Old Testament Lesson, by praising and thanking God for calling the Corinthians (obviously as well as ***all*** Gentile peoples) to fellowship with Jesus through God's ***undeserved grace*** to us. As a consequence, God has blessed the Corinthians with a ***knowledge*** of the true God, as well as ***spiritual*** gifts, and will be their ***stay*** throughout all of their lives. St. Paul concludes this reading by assuring the Corinthians ***(and us!)*** that God is faithful to ***all*** who have accepted Jesus as their Lord.

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Gospel Lesson: John 1: 29-42a

Immediately prior to today's reading, we read that the ***Jews*** sent priests and Levites to John the Baptist to determine from ***him*** who he was. John's response was

—I am ***not*** the Christ,
—I am ***not*** the prophet Elijah,
—but I ***am*** the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord," quoting the prophet **Isaiah**.

As today's reading starts, we find Jesus walking toward John the Baptist, and John says of Him that ***he*** is the Lamb of God, who takes ***away*** the sin of the world. It is then recorded that

—Jesus' ***ministry*** follows John's, but Jesus has ***seniority*** over John by virtue of the fact that He existed ***before*** John did, and
—The ***Holy Spirit*** descended and ***remained*** on Jesus after John had baptized Him.

But then John explains that he had never ***met*** Jesus, but that ***God*** told him that he would be able to ***identify*** the Messiah by the following characteristics:

—The Holy Spirit would descend and ***remain*** on him at his baptism .
—Jesus would be the one who ***baptizes with the Holy Spirit.***

The following day, Jesus ***again*** walks by where John is preaching and baptizing, and John identifies to his disciples that Jesus ***is*** the ***Messiah.*** The upshot of that comment results in two of ***John's*** disciples following Jesus, one of whom is Andrew. ***Andrew***, in turn, finds his brother, Simon (later know as ***Peter***), tells him that he has ***found*** the Messiah, and brings Simon to Jesus. ***Witnessing*** in action!

Third Sunday After the Epiphany

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 9: 1-4

Recall that Isaiah was God's representative to the ***Southern*** Kingdom as the ***Northern*** Kingdom fizzled to its end around 720 BC. At that time, ***Assyria***, a large kingdom to the ***north*** of the Northern Kingdom, ***attacked*** the Northern Kingdom and dispersed all its citizens into the ***Assyrian*** Kingdom. With Naphtali and Zebulun, subsequently being included in the region of ***Galilee***, being among the ***northern***-most territories of the Northern Kingdom, it would not be ***unusual*** for them to bear the initial ***brunt*** of an army attacking from the north.

In today's lesson, God through Isaiah is prophesying ***about*** the coming Messiah by **looking back** at the time of this dispersion from the standpoint of the Messiah having ***already*** come. Consequently, the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali are no longer gloomy but ***rejoicing***. Why? Because Galilee, the home of Jesus, is the first territory to experience the ***light*** of ***God' grace*** in Christ Jesus which removed their ***burden*** and ended their beatings with a ***rod.***

> ***What*** burden? The burden of ***sin***.
> ***What*** rod? The rod of God's ***discipline*** wielded by their enemies.

But what is this comparison to "the day of ***Midian***?" Do you remember that huge army that God had ***Gideon*** defeat with just his 300 men? That was the army of ***Midian.*** And what is meant here is that, just as the defeat of the army of Midian seemed to be an ***impossibility***, so also does the defeat of ***sin*** and the ***replacement*** of God's discipline with his ***grace*** seem like an impossibility to the peoples of Zebulun and Naphtali. But with God, ***nothing*** is impossible!

Epistle Lesson: 1 Corinthians 1: 10-18

St. Paul, in this ***first*** letter of his to the Corinthians, is forced to address an issue of ***division*** within the body of Christ in Corinth. What is this division all about? ***Cliques*** were being formed based on who was baptized by whom. St. Paul is simply ***aghast***, because the Corinthians have focused on ***trivialities*** rather than on the ***essence*** of Christianity: Christ died on the cross to take the punishment for ***our*** sins. The simplicity of the Gospel message can be taken as ***foolishness*** by some, but to ***others*** it is the power and grace of God to save us from our ***own*** foolishness.

Gospel Lesson: Matthew 4: 12-25

Today's lesson recounts the beginning of Jesus' ministry, where he leaves the area where he had been baptized by John to go into ***Galilee***, the land of Zebulun and Naphtali. Part of the reason he started ***here*** is that Herod Antipas, the ***son*** of Herod the Great, had ***arrested*** John the Baptist. Why? Because Herod Antipas had married his brother Philip's wife, Herodias. And John the Baptist targeted both Herod and Herodias for defying God's law **(Lev. 18:16)**, which stated that someone should not marry his brother's wife (obviously, while the brother is still living), an ***adulterous*** relationship. So Herodias wanted to get ***rid*** of that voice accusing her.

In any case, this results in Jesus beginning his ministry in ***Galilee***, thus fulfilling the ***prophecy*** of Isaiah which we had read earlier. Jesus' message? "***Repent,*** for the kingdom of heaven is at ***hand.***" Those who repented would thus be able to ***rejoice***, as stated in Isaiah's prophecy as well. As he went, Jesus started to call ***disciples*** to follow him. He also demonstrated ***why*** the people of Zebulun and Naphtali had even ***more*** reason to rejoice: He showed that the kingdom of Heaven was ***indeed*** at hand by

—healing the ***sick,***
—casting out ***demons,*** and
—curing ***epileptics*** and ***paralytics.***

As a consequence, people from not only all over the original ***Promised Land*** but also from ***Syria***, came to him to hear him and to be ***healed.***