

WEEK #4 – HEARING GOD’S VOICE DURING THE JOURNEY
January 26- February 1, 2009

MONDAY – January 26th

CENTERING BREATH PRAYER: Reveal your glory and majesty...through your gracious mercy.

Glorious and majestic God, as this fourth week of Epiphany begins, I come today to worship you and bring you thanks for this journey of discovery and discipleship. Each day brings new discoveries about you and myself. May this week help me to learn how to listen to your voice in new ways. In your gracious name, I pray. Amen.

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 111:1-6

KEY VERSES: Psalm 111:3-4:

(3) “Everything he does reveals his glory and majesty. His righteousness never fails. (4) Who can forget the wonders he performs? How gracious and merciful is our Lord!” (NLT).

Glorious, majestic, righteous, wonderful, active, gracious and merciful! Whew! What a list of attributes of our God summed up in just two short verses from this Psalm! This is not an exhaustive list by any means, yet it is certainly a great starting point for which to give thanks and praise. Worship, as has been said before, is a great place to start (or end) our week. So, we begin today with a Psalm of worship and praise. We know that God truly is glorious, majestic, righteous, wonderful, active, gracious and merciful. We can give praise for all these and much more. We can also sit in quiet awe, contemplating how these powerful traits of our God work in our lives. This week we are going to continue our journey and along the way we will explore some of the ways we might hear God’s voice. Our journey is not of much value to God or to us if we miss the directions and the meanings which God provides. The way we find these is to hear God’s voice along the way. One of the ways we may hear God’s voice is through worship, both in corporate worship with others and in our quiet, intimate devotional time as well. Worship takes many forms, but the ultimate goal is to give praise and honor to our Lord and to listen with our hearts for the calling to serve which is inherent in our acceptance of Jesus as our Lord and Savior. Last week we also began with a Psalm, Psalm 62 in which we talked about how the soul waits in quiet anticipation for the hope which God’s power and refuge brings. It is often difficult to hear God’s voice when we are surrounded by the noise of the world, including, sometimes, the noise of our worship. That is not to say that worship should be all silence, indeed we are encouraged to shout our praise and make a joyful noise unto the Lord. But, when we are ready to listen for God’s voice, clearing away the sounds and waiting in the quiet expectancy of our soul can be the most productive. Responding with praise and joyful celebration after we have heard God’s voice is not only acceptable, but desired. We know we hear God’s voice in other ways and we will speak of some of them later in the week, but for today, let us listen for God’s voice in the quiet of our soul in the act of worship and praise.

Sometimes we can choose the place and time for our worship, when we can bask in the love of God. Sometimes we need to worship where we are, whether it is a place and time of our own choosing or not. Sometimes we can take our time, leisurely resting in the presence of the Lord and sometimes we worship in short bursts because our time is limited and our commitments restrict us. No matter the time or place, rushed or leisurely, the Lord will honor our sincerity. It is the attitude of the heart, the intention to worship which the Lord honors, not

the manner or the length of time. Sometimes the voice of the Lord is soothing, giving us rest from our labors and comfort in our stress. Sometimes the voice of the Lord is commanding, insisting on our attention because there is a need we are called to address. The urges which come out of our attentive, worshipful quiet time need to be considered carefully. Do they reflect God's love and compassionate mercy? Do they urge something which is contrary to what we understand about God? If we find these urges to be consistent with God's ministry among us, then we have heard the voice of our God and action is required. If we find we have urges which are inconsistent with God's ministry among us we need to be careful before taking action. Though God often speaks with us in the quiet times we spend together, we need to ask for confirmation through God's word and sometimes, when we are uncertain, a spiritual mentor may help clarify what we have heard. No matter what we hear from the Lord, let us always give praise and honor to the one who is glorious, majestic, righteous, wonderful, active, gracious and merciful.

ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURES: Romans 10:8-17; Psalm 62

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND/OR JOURNALING:

1. Do I expect to hear the Lord's voice in my quiet time with God?
2. Do I know how to confirm that what I hear is from God?
3. When and where do I tend to hear the voice of the Lord for my life?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION:

1. Spend some time today in worship giving glory and honor to the Lord. If possible, spend some of it in quiet, reflective time listening for what the Lord may have to say to you.
2. Write down some of the things you have heard from the Lord. Reflect on what your response to them was. Did you have difficulty deciding if what you were hearing was from the Lord or not?
3. If you receive something today from the Lord, act upon it.

Gracious Lord, I long to hear your voice. I am not always certain that what I hear is from you. Please open my heart to receive your word and act upon what I hear from you. When I am in doubt about what I hear, show me how to confirm your will. In all that I do, may I always pray for your voice to lead me. In your merciful name, I pray. Amen.

TUESDAY – January 27th

CENTERING BREATH PRAYER: Speak to me...and I shall listen.

Glorious Lord, how would you speak to me today? I come prepared to listen and to learn, eager to obey your word. As we come together in prayerful communion, I await your voice. In your speaking name, I pray. Amen.

SCRIPTURE: Deuteronomy 18:15-18

KEY VERSE: Deuteronomy 18:18:

“I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command” (NRSV).

How often have we prayed for a direct word from God? When we seek God for direction and answers to the complex questions we have about our lives and the world, we often get frustrated because God chooses not to speak to us directly so that there is no misunderstanding of God’s answers. Yet, when Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt to the mountain of the Lord, God’s voice terrified the people and they asked for an intermediary, such as Moses was, so that they would not have to listen to the voice of God. How different were their desires from ours? If we heard directly from the Lord every time we had a question, would we follow the instructions, obey the direct word of the Lord? And, if we did not, where would we hide from the consequences of our disobedience?

Our scripture passage comes from Moses in the middle of a long segment of scriptures concerning the way the Israelites are to behave after they have entered into the Promised Land. They are urged to refrain from the practices of the people they are about to dispossess. Yet, even with all the words given in this book, it is seen that the Lord knows that written (and oral) laws will need to be reinforced by words from the Lord. Since the people fear to hear directly from the Lord, God promises to “raise up” prophets from among the people to speak God’s word to them. I see this as a part of the Lord’s compassion and mercy for the people. Though “fear of the Lord” is seen as wisdom and the beginning of worship, God does not wish his people to be terrified of God. Respect, honor, obedience, worship, awe and love are all a part of the concept of the “fear of the Lord.” Terror and abject fear of God’s presence is not. Therefore, the Lord tells us in verse 17 that, *“They are right in what they have said.”* This is the impetus for God’s reassurance that God will “raise up” prophets among the people to convey God’s words in an indirect, yet sanctioned way. Later in this passage we will address the consequences for the people who refuse to listen to the prophets and the warning to the prophets who might make up something to say that God did not give them, etc. But, today we are exploring the concept of someone who speaks for the Lord, rather than the direct voice of God which might terrify God’s people. Sometimes this worked well for the Israelites, but often it did not. The people often scorned those the Lord chose as prophets and ignored the word of the Lord given through them.

Many years after the prophets, Jesus was born. The voice of the Lord now came from God’s son, not simply men chosen by God. Jesus gave us both words which teach us how to live in the kingdom of heaven and examples of the nature of God in whose image we were made. We might be prone to believe that with the advent of Jesus, God’s son there would be no further need for prophets. Yet, in the letters of Paul, specifically 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 when he is teaching about the gifts of the Spirit, prophet is still considered one of the roles given to some people by the Holy Spirit, God’s Spirit. So, who are these prophets

today and how do we know when they are speaking with the voice of God? First we need to remember that a prophet is not a fortune teller, he or she is one who speaks the word of the Lord. He or she is also bringing the word of the Lord to build up the body of Christ, not to foretell future events. We also have the written word, available for everyone, not a selected few. Within our scriptures, we have so much of God's words preserved for us that we may at times not see any need for someone to speak the word of the Lord. It is easy to say that our pastors who open the written scriptures to us and the teachers who work to instill understanding of God's written words are the prophets of today. Yet, in the list of spiritual gifts listed in 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 we find not only prophets, but pastors and teachers as well. Often, I think, the role of the prophet today is to speak to compassionate and social action ministries which we tend to neglect. Those who advocate for the marginalized and work for social and economic justice as well as environmental protection often encounter considerable opposition from those who proclaim to be followers of Christ as well as the secular world. How we are expected to treat such issues is outlined in our written scriptures and in the behavior of Jesus on earth. Yet, we, like the Israelites with their prophets, often scorn those who would bring the inequities to our attention. Those who are called to work in these areas may not have powerful backing or charismatic appeal, yet God calls them to speak. Shall we listen and hear the voice of God? And, when we hear the word of God through others, shall we take action or will we sit back waiting for someone else to act? Our action or inaction speaks volumes about our reception of God's word. Our journey of discovery and discipleship requires us to learn how to hear and to respond to God's voice. Let's do so as we continue to travel Epiphany's road.

ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURES: 1 Corinthians 12:27-31; Ephesians 4:4-16

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND/OR JOURNALING:

1. Who do I know who may be a prophet for the Lord?
2. How do I respond to the messages I hear through the voice of God's prophets today?
3. Have I ever been called to give the word of the Lord?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION:

1. Take a look at some of the people who are or have been advocating for social, economic or environmental justice. How might they or might they not be modern day prophets?
2. Take a look at some of the people in your congregation who push for changes that might stem from a unique perspective given from the Lord. Evaluate how those changes might build up the body of Christ and if you agree with them, work along side those who are working to spread the word of the Lord.

Lord, it is sometimes hard for us today to recognize your prophets. Open my ears to hear the words of your prophets and help me to recognize them when they speak. More than that, Lord, help me to follow through when I know what you would have me to do. In your loving and vocal name, I pray. Amen.

WEDNESDAY – January 28th

CENTERING BREATH PRAYER: May I always be amazed...at the authority in your voice.

Amazing Savior, I come before you once more prepared to be amazed and taught by your authority and wisdom. Exorcize my demons and lead me today by the authority of your voice and the power of your love. In your exciting name, I pray. Amen.

SCRIPTURE: Mark 1:21-28

KEY VERSE: Mark 1:27

“Amazement gripped the audience, and they began to discuss what had happened. “What sort of new teaching is this?” they asked excitedly. “It has such authority! Even evil spirits obey his orders!” (NLT).

Early in his ministry, Jesus goes to Capernaum, a place which will see much of Jesus during his three or so years of ministry before Calvary. Perhaps one reason Jesus returns often to Capernaum is his reception there. Amazement, excitement and reception of his teaching greet Jesus over and over in Capernaum, unlike other places such as Nazareth, his hometown where he was completely rejected and other cities where the Pharisees, Priests, Levites and other Religious leaders often condemn his teachings and his actions. It is interesting to me that what amazes the people in Capernaum at this time is his ability to control the evil spirits, something which we sometimes have trouble believing still exist. Our modern times consider the demons which possessed or the evil spirits which recognize Jesus and obey his commands were mental illnesses rather than some outside force which has power over our minds and souls. Perhaps some of those Jesus healed of so-called demons or evil spirits had mental illnesses. But, to say there are no longer demons, we are choosing willful blindness. Part of the good news that Jesus brought is that through Jesus we can identify them in ourselves and in our communities, and gives us the power and wisdom to call them out. Prejudice, greed, the love of success, power, possessions, comfort, violence, addiction, worship of the past and cynicism are all demons which can wield great power over our lives. Jesus gives us the power through himself to overcome that power. These demons can inhabit us, possess us, tempt us to live in unholy ways and worship at the altars of little gods. Jesus gave us teaching which gives the community authority over them. This was the new teaching the people in Capernaum were so excited about, that had such authority. Do we use that authority?

It's no wonder that Jesus' fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee. Not only was Jesus healing the physical illnesses, including ones which were present from birth, but he was able to bring out the demons and evil spirits present in humanity! If we think about it, even his sacrifice on the cross was to bring about deliverance from the evil of sin itself, something which is present in us all. The best tool we have to recognize and call out the demons within us is the Holy Spirit, Christ's living presence which still has the power and authority to rid us of these powers which can strangle us and hold us hostage to this world. Christ's teachings concerning the demons of prejudice, greed, love of success, power, possessions, comfort, violence addiction, worship of the past or future, cynicism or any other demon we can name which stands between us and the kingdom of heaven is more powerful than these demons can ever be. It's no wonder the people were amazed and excited about the authority which Jesus brought into his teaching. We, too, should be excited and even amazed to see how we can bring that same authority into our own lives when we listen to God's voice present in the teachings of God's son, Jesus. Since we have the same Spirit in us

that was in Christ Jesus, we can also have the same authority to overcome the demons with which we struggle. That's a word from God powerful enough to bring us all the deliverance we might desire in our faith journey. As we continue to travel Epiphany's road of discovery, let's call forth the power and authority of Christ against all the demons with which we struggle and enter into the kingdom of heaven.

ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURES: Matthew 7:28-29; Luke 4:31-37

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND/OR JOURNALING:

1. Am I still amazed and excited about the authority of Christ's teachings?
2. What demons do I need to call forth from my life using the authority given in Christ's teaching?
3. How do I hear the voice of God in the overcoming of my demons?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION:

1. List all the demons in your life that you would like to oust.
2. Take a good look at your congregation. What demons would you like to see gone there? Pray for the authority of Christ to overcome them.

Holy One, who holds all authority in heaven and on earth, I praise your name and pray for your special touch in my life and the life of my congregation. May all our demons be cast out and our lives be filled with your Spirit. May I hear your voice calling me to your service today, free from the evil that would ensnare. In your authoritative name, I pray. Amen.

THURSDAY – January 29th

CENTERING BREATH PRAYER: I don't know all the answers...but I know I love you.

Loving God, so often I think I know all the answers, but I know that I really do not. As I come before you today I want to tell you how much I love you. It doesn't matter what answers I have or not as long as I have your love. May I grow in both knowledge and love as we commune together today. In your loving name, I pray. Amen.

SCRIPTURE: 1 Corinthians 8:1-6

KEY VERSES: 1 Corinthians 8:1b-3:

(1b) “While knowledge may make us feel important, it is love that really builds up the church. (2) Anyone who claims to know all the answers doesn't really know very much. (3) But the person who loves God is the one God knows and cares for” (NLT).

1 Corinthians 8 seems to be about a subject which has little meaning for us in the world today. Food sacrificed to idols is something of a rarity now, as indeed, are idols themselves. That is not to say that there are not many things which we place before God and so could be considered idols. But, the worship of idols, or images of gods, is not the norm for us as it was in the world at the time of the early church. Nor are animal sacrifices a part of our culture either. So, what do we do with the teaching we find here in 1 Corinthians 8? The knowledge Paul speaks of here is about food sacrificed to idols. However, knowledge can be about all sorts of things and often we think we have all the answers to some theological subject and others do not. Our knowledge can be faulty or incomplete, yet we insist it is correct and feel superior to other Christians because of it. Yet, our teaching here would indicate that such knowledge may make us feel important but it doesn't really help the body of Christ very much. Our key verses today speak loudly about the value of love over the value of knowledge, real or imagined.

So, where is the voice of God in all this? Perhaps we need to listen for the Lord's voice in the love which builds up the church. Christ's overwhelming love demonstrated by every part of his life, death and resurrection, speaks compassionate and loving words recorded all through the gospels. Certainly love is the key word from Christ to his disciples, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35 NIV). Later in 1 Corinthians, in the famous 13th chapter all about love and its great importance, Paul speaks with God's voice reminding us just how love is the most important word the Lord speaks to us and that knowledge vanishes away. We don't have all the answers about anything! But we do have God's love standing behind us and we have been commanded to love one another as a sign that we are Christ's disciples. Whenever we are in doubt about the knowledge we believe we have, love is the answer we need to find. In our translation used above, 1b says, “While knowledge may make us feel important, it is love that really builds up the church.” The NRSV says, “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” This translation makes me think of someone who gets a swelled head. Knowledge about something can give us a swelled head, but love makes us better than we were.

The phrase “What would Jesus do?” has gained much popularity as a way to commit one's self to becoming more like Jesus. Though it is a good goal for us as Christians, the real question become “If I am to become like Jesus, what will I be like?” A close friend of mine has often reiterated that, “If we become more like Jesus, we will not need to ask what Jesus would do because we would do things the way Jesus would do them without having to think about it.

It would become our nature to do things the way Jesus would do them.” The nature of Jesus is to do all things out of compassionate love. When we become loving in the same way that Jesus is loving, we will love instead of have knowledge. Our knowledge will become loving examples of Christ’s love and compassion, building up the body of Christ, the church. Let’s stop worrying about the things we think we know about God. Let’s just love one another and our God without qualification. Then our journey of discipleship will be steeped in the love of Christ and God’s voice will ring with loving approval.

ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURES: John 13:34-35, 14:15-21, 15:9-17; 1 Corinthians 13

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND/OR JOURNALING:

1. How often do I let my spiritual knowledge overshadow my love for others?
2. How central to my faith journey is my love of others as well as my love for God?
3. How can I make love more central to my faith journey?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION:

1. Meditate on love and how it works in your life.
2. Practice random acts of kindness and outrageous love today.

Loving Savior, teach me how to love. When I get a swelled head over the knowledge I think I have, fill me with love to counteract it. Give me a heart to love your church and to help build it up with your love instead of filling it with knowledge which may be faulty or incomplete. In your ever-loving name, I pray. Amen.

FRIDAY – January 30th

CENTERING BREATH PRAYER: Lord, hold me accountable...for the words I speak.

Holy One, who holds me accountable for my actions, be with me as I travel Epiphany's road today. I long to hear your voice, but I fear my apathy and the consequences of my own disobedience. How grateful am I for your forgiveness and mercy when I fail. In your holy name, I pray. Amen.

SCRIPTURE: Deuteronomy 18:19-20

KEY VERSES: Deuteronomy 18:19-20:

(19) “Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. (20) But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die” (NRSV).

Accountability is the word for the day. How often we go blindly from one day to another, missing one opportunity after another to do the things we already know we need to do. We have heard the voice of the Lord through the prophets and our pastors and teachers, yet we so often fail to follow through! It's a little like all the New Year's resolutions we make each year. We know they are good things and will better our lives or the lives of those around us, yet year after year we fail to keep them past a few weeks and sometimes a few days or even hours. I'm not trying to put a guilt trip on you. But, there is such a thing as accountability. When we impose New Year's resolutions upon ourselves, we are only accountable to ourselves for their accomplishment. God has spoken to us in various ways, through scripture, through the prophets both long ago and near at hand, through our own inner voice and most importantly, through Jesus. Though mercy and forgiveness abound in the nature of our Lord, we are still held accountable for our actions. Christ has paid the ultimate price for our redemption, but there is still room for accountability. As we go back to our scripture passage from Deuteronomy 18, we find two different sets of people who are to be held accountable. The first is the people who hear the word of the Lord from God's prophets. We are told that God will personally hold them accountable for heeding the words of the Lord they have heard. The second group of those to be held accountable is the prophets themselves. They must speak only what is given by God. They shall not speak in God's name something which God has not commanded or speak in the name of other gods. How we are to be held accountable for not heeding the prophet's words from God is not spelled out for us, but the penalty for speaking in the name of other gods or claiming words from God which God has not given is death.

OK. We don't have anointed prophets today. There is no official way to know if a person speaking is giving a direct word from the Lord. If, however, the word being spoken is consistent with what we know about the Lord and leads us into a better relationship with the Lord, then we can assume that at that particular moment he or she is speaking as a prophet. If we believe that we have heard the voice of the Lord through a particular person then we are held accountable for our response to that word. When we are given the opportunity to speak (or to write) words concerning God's nature, or Christ's redemption of humanity, or perhaps, even how we should respond to God, we need to be very careful not to claim to speak specifically for the Lord unless we are very, very certain we have received God's calling to do so. I believe that there are times when what I write comes directly from the Lord. There are other times when I believe the Lord influences what I write, but I am not sure. I have never used the words, “Thus says the Lord!” Though I believe there are times when God uses me as

a prophet, I do not claim my words as direct from God. I offer possibilities which allow God to confirm or deny that it is God's voice speaking. I do this not just to protect myself from taking on a mantle which may not be mine, but to protect those who listen from the requirement to heed the words if they do not hear God's voice within them. This may not seem like faith, but I believe that God uses all our responses to work within us. As we continue the Epiphany journey, let us respond to God's voice wherever we find it and when we are given something from God to say, let us be faithful to deliver it.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND/OR JOURNALING:

1. How do I respond to modern day prophets?
2. Have I ever felt I was called to speak the word of the Lord? How did that go?
3. Do I feel accountable for following the words I know came from the Lord, now or in the past?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION:

A couple of days ago we spent some time looking to see where modern day prophets might be found. Today, let us think about some of the things such people have said which might be a word from the Lord. Join in the work of someone you believe has given you a word from the Lord. Honestly consider their words as God's voice for you.

O, Lord, I often hear words which may come from you, yet I often chafe against them or ignore them completely. Open my ears to hear your prophetic voice through the people I encounter. Help me to respond with commitment to your calling, whatever that calling may be. Open my heart to the love you have for me and let me understand that this same love prompts all your words to me. For it is in your precious name, I pray. Amen.

SATURDAY – January 31st

CENTERING BREATH PRAYER: May I never use my freedom...to cause others to stumble.

Dearest Savior, thank you for the freedom you have given me. May I always be careful in how I exercise that freedom so that others are not led into wrong paths because of my example. As we commune together once again, let me become more aware of the consequences of my choices for others. In your merciful name, I pray. Amen.

SCRIPTURE: 1 Corinthians 8:7-13

KEY VERSES: 1 Corinthians 8:9, 12:

(9) “But be careful that your freedom does not cause those who are weak in faith to fall into sin. (12) When you sin against your brothers and sisters in Christ like this and cause them to do what they feel is wrong, you are also sinning against Christ” (NCV).

We find ourselves today back in 1 Corinthians in the strange passage about food offered to idols. Paul reminds us that Christ has set us free from the dietary restrictions which the Israelites regarded as essential to their faith journey. He also makes the point that since there is really only one God, food offered to idols (which are not really gods) or sacrificed to other gods (which do not exist) is not really tainted. However, there were those who could not get the restrictions out of their minds and truly believed that eating such food would be sinful for them. Paul lets his readers know that when people believe something to be sinful, they can be tempted into sinning by those who have more understanding. For me, one of the best examples of this principle comes from the consumption of alcoholic beverages. There is no place in the Bible which teaches that drinking alcoholic beverages is sin (though there are many who believe it is). Jesus drank wine with his disciples on a regular basis. The sin is not in drinking, but in drinking to excess and becoming drunk. As we now know, many people cannot stop with one drink, but once they begin drinking they cannot stop and become drunk causing many, many problems. For these people, drinking any alcoholic beverage will cause them to sin. Now, I do not have this problem. I can drink one alcoholic beverage (making it last a very long time) and not have another one for years. But, my freedom to drink can cause someone with a drinking problem to stumble, to drink to excess. So, it is better not to drink at all so that I will not cause another to do so.

I'm sure there are other analogies you may think of. Causing someone to do what they feel is wrong, or something they cannot control before doing it to excess is a sin against Christ. My freedom ends when it causes others to fall. How many times do we use, or should I say, abuse the freedom we have, especially here in the United States where freedom is almost worshipped, to justify greed and self-interest without regard to those our excesses deprive of some of the basic human rights? Paul asks us in this passage, “How are we using our freedom bought by Christ’s grace?” Are we using it to build up our neighbors through love? Or are we using it to support our own pride and desire? We know how Jesus expects us to treat one another. Paul is simply warning us that when we choose “not to know” how our behavior is affecting others that we sin not only against them, but against Christ.

And where is God’s voice in all of this? It is Christ’s grace which has given us this freedom we have been reviewing. Christ has set us free from the wages of sin and death. Paul brings us the voice of God by warning us against the abuse of that very freedom. How free can we really be when our freedom comes at the expense of others? Often, we don’t see how our freedom comes at the expense of others when the others are far away from us. But,

there are others in this country whose labor pays for our excesses which we take for granted because we believe we have been blessed by God in our prosperity. God's voice speaks to open our eyes to the sin which is inherent in such thinking. As we continue down Epiphany's road, let us remember that discipleship never advances at the cost of another's oppression. We have been called to set captives free not exploit them, relieve oppression not add to it. Let's keep our eyes and ears open as we travel so that we can advance Christ's freedom for all.

ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURES: Luke 4:16-21

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND/OR JOURNALING:

1. How do I handle the freedom I have from Christ's grace?
2. What are some ways I might be causing another to stumble?
3. Do I need to rethink some of the freedoms I take for granted? How might they be maintained by oppression of others?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION:

Look into a ministry which works to relieve the oppression that may stem from the abuse of some of our freedoms. One such in the USA might be sweat shops in the clothing industry.

Lord Jesus Christ, thank you for purchasing my freedom from sin and death. Open my eyes to the ways I may be abusing that same freedom. Help me to see the ways I might become a stumbling block for someone else. Forgive me and lead me away from such behavior. In your merciful name, I pray. Amen.

4th SUNDAY IN EPIPHANY – February 1st

CENTERING BREATH PRAYER: Awesome God...I praise your name!

Awesome God, you have done so much for me! I come to you today to praise your name and to learn from your wisdom. As we sit together in awesome communion, let my reverence for you grow and my wisdom increase because of your holy name in which I pray. Amen.

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 111:7-10

KEY VERSES: Psalm 111:9-10:

(9) “He has paid a full ransom for his people. He has guaranteed his covenant with them forever. What a holy, awe-inspiring name he has! (10) Reverence for the Lord is the foundation of true wisdom. The rewards of wisdom come to all who obey him. Praise his name forever!” (NLT).

As we round out our week and return to Psalm 111, we also return to the concept of “*the fear of the Lord*.” I must admit that I have never liked to think about fearing God. I much prefer the translation above in which the traditional words “*fear of the Lord*” have been changed to “*reverence for the Lord*.” My difficulties stem from the fact that I grew up believing in the God of love and forgiveness which I learned about in my relationship with Jesus, the Christ. My intimate relationship with God was forged in Christ who insisted that God loves me and I must never be afraid. So, therefore, I have always looked with skepticism on the phrase “*fear of the Lord*.” Yet the term “*reverence*” does not completely cover the awesomeness of God nor the complexity of the concept of the “*fear of the Lord*.” Perhaps the realization that wisdom springs out of this concept and that the “*fear of the Lord*” is the starting point for our wisdom can give us a more balanced viewpoint. Perhaps we need to take a look back at a view of the grandeur of God which is freely expressed throughout this Psalm. We began at the beginning of the week with the words “glorious, majestic, righteous, wonderful, active, gracious and merciful.” To these we can add “provider, powerful, giving, faithful, just, trustworthy, redeemer, holy and awesome.” Even this list is not an exhaustive one! Though many Psalms also included it, Christ embodied the most significant attribute of all: love.

Wisdom stems from the Lord, and holding the Lord at the center of our being brings forth the beginning of wisdom. Perhaps that is the true meaning of “*fear of the Lord*,” holding the Lord at the center of our being. Certainly loving God, truly loving God and not just giving a little lip service once in a while, brings with it a holy reverence which transcends fear. After all, “*There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love*” (1John 4:18 NIV). Since Christ has made this truth known to us, than it would follow that the true “*fear of the Lord*” is complete love of the Lord. When we truly love God with our entire being, not out of fear for the consequences or punishment for disobedience, but simply because God loves us and we desire to return God’s love, then we have reached past “*fear of the Lord*” and can abide in God’s love. Instead of a wisdom based on obedience, we receive perfect love gained through Christ’s obedience. It is an awesome responsibility to accept what Christ has done for us and enter into the intimate relationship with God which was begun in Christ’s obedience to the Father. Christ often taught about his oneness with the Father and his complete obedience of what the Father desired of him. Love compels obedience, not out of fear of punishment, but out of a desire to please the one we love! The first and greatest commandment, the one Jesus kept completely, is to “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and*

with all your strength (mind)" (Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:37 NIV). In the Old Testament this greatest of commandments was given and the people were to obey out of "*fear of the Lord.*" Christ taught us that it is out of our love of the Lord we are able to do anything else. Obedience to one we fear is possible. Obedience to one we love is greater. Wisdom comes out of the obedience. This is how I hear the voice of the Lord in this Psalm. I am not afraid of God, not because God is not powerful enough to command me, but because God is loving enough to forgive me. Such a God is far more worthy of my praise and honor than one who would only command me. God's love transcends everything. Praise the Lord who is able to command, yet chooses to love! As we travel into the next week of Epiphany, let us praise God who loved us enough to send Christ Jesus to redeem us and bring us back into an intimate, loving relationship. Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!

ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURES: Matthew 22: 34-40; 1 John 4:7-21

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND/OR JOURNALING:

1. How do I see the concept of the "*fear of the Lord?*"
2. Do I give God the praise and honor God so richly deserves? How often?
3. How much do I really love the Lord? Is it enough?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION:

1. Write a Psalm of praise to the Lord.
2. Get out your favorite praise songs (praise hymns) and sing praises to the Lord or play praise music as you travel or work today.
3. Worship the Lord in beauty and holiness, both corporately and individually today.

Dearest Lord, I do not praise you enough for the love which you have given me. My love is not yet been made perfect or complete, but I offer what I have and pray for you to fill me more and more completely with your love. As we continue this Epiphany journey of discovery and discipleship, I would ask that your love for me would transform me from a selfish and shallow individual into one who can love you and your people as you love us. In your loving and wise name, I pray. Amen.