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What a timely Collect we have been given for this week: *O Lord, we beseech thee mercifully to hear us; and grant that we, to whom thou hast given an hearty desire to pray, may, by thy mighty aid, be defended and comforted in all dangers and adversities.* This week's news has not been very encouraging, and I hope that if we found ourselves despairing over what is going on all around us, that we remembered to pray. Prayer can be easy to forget in the face of such distractions and bad news in general. But let us not get discouraged; we may think sometimes that our prayers are useless, we may wonder if they actually make it into God's ear, but we have the assurance from the prophet Isaiah who says that *God is always more ready to hear than we to pray, and that before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear.*

We begin today's Collect by begging God to hear us and throwing ourselves on God's mercy. We pray that God will *mercifully hear us*, yet we realize that we cannot even pray without God's help for it is God himself through his Spirit who gives us the desire to pray. As we reflect upon this, we are less tempted to condemn others for others' seeming unfaithfulness for we realize that "there, but for the grace of God, go I". Prayer begins and ends with God—our role is to be a willing servant who desires God to use us to his glory. St. Augustine, speaking of the centrality of Jesus Christ in all prayer, said: *Christ prays for us as a priest, prays in us as our Head, is prayed to, by us, as our God. Let us recognize, therefore, our voices in him, and his voices in us.* Our petition is that we *may by thy mighty aid be defended and comforted in all dangers and adversities.* Note that we pray not that God shall keep us from danger but that He might protect and console us in our dangers and adversities. Whatever ills and evils may befall us, we know that God can make good come of any situation if we offer it to him.

We see this truth clearly in the life of the prophet Moses. Moses leads the Israelites out of Egypt, out of a land of idolatry and into the wilderness. Finally, God comes down upon Mount Sinai and Moses goes up the mountain to meet with Him. He meets with God for forty days and forty nights. While he is gone the Israelites turn to each other and say, "Moses is obviously dead, what do we do now?" Instead of continuing to worship the One True God, they imitate their neighbors, those nice rich people with nice families, houses and lands, and who worshiped a false god. So, the Israelites made for themselves a golden calf, and they bowed down and worshiped it. Maybe they thought, "we will soon be in Canaan, let us do as the

Canaanites do.” However, God, who is all knowing, interrupts His meeting with Moses and tells Him to go straighten things out, and He promises to destroy the Israelites over this great sin. We see that idolatry always leads to death.

God Almighty has said that He will destroy the very people He brought out of Egypt with signs and wonders. Surely Moses knew that God was fully capable of following through on His word. He must have trembled when he knelt down before the Lord God Almighty and prayed for mercy over his people. Moses was brave to ask God to spare the Israelites. What is remarkable about this story though is that the idol is still in the camp and yet God promises mercy on them. This is a wonderful lesson in the power of prayer. We should not think though that this proves that God goes about seeking whom He may annihilate. It proves instead that even in the face of great sin God still seeks to bring back those who have gone astray. Let us remember, that by being merciful to the Israelites, God gives them the chance to repent and turn back to Him. God keeps the Israelites in spite of this great trial and adversity.

This is explained to us in the Epistle and Gospel for today. Why do the Israelites and so many go astray and worship at the altar of false gods and idols? Why does the sheep leave the fold of the ninety and nine and the silver piece go missing? Because *the adversary, the devil, as a roaring lion walketh about seeking whom he may devour*. We know that we cannot blame everything on the devil, but we must recognize that the devil looks for any occasion to lead us astray and takes opportunity with the occasions we give him. But our job is not to cower away in fear but to pray. We must pray for the good shepherd to go out after the sheep who has gone astray and bring them back to the fold. We must pray for the silver piece to be found and returned to the purse. We must pray for God to be merciful and to go out and seek the unrepentant and the lost, that they be converted by God’s grace and brought back into the fold of the church.

The sheep who goes astray and is brought back into the fold and the lost coin over which so much energy is spent in finding are parables that show God’s willingness to seek out the lost, and even those who we thought would never enter the kingdom of heaven. We must realize that we are represented in this parable too. Jesus tells us in this parable that when we go astray, when we go missing, Jesus will come and find us. He desires for us to return safely to His fold where we belong. All of humanity belongs in the fold of Jesus Christ, all of humanity bears the imprint of the divine image on the piece of silver. And so we learn that we must pray, pray

that God will be merciful, pray that God will draw all people and ourselves into His kingdom, and when we see this begin to happen then we must rejoice. Let us offer to God prayers of thanksgiving that He is going out to seek the lost and those who have wandered away, that He does hear us, and that He will defend and comfort us in all dangers and adversities. Let us not forget to pray.

*Almighty God, who pourest out on all who desire it, the spirit of grace and of supplication: Deliver us, when we draw nigh to thee, from coldness of heart and wanderings of mind, that with steadfast thoughts and kindled affections, we may worship thee in spirit and in truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*