

2nd Sunday of Advent December 4, 2005

INTRODUCTION: (Isaiah 40, 1-5.9-11; II Peter 3, 8-14; Mark 1, 1-8) Our first reading today introduces that part of Isaiah known as the "Book of Consolation." It is a beautifully comforting message for God's people. For 50 years the Jews had been a captured and enslaved people in Babylon (Iraq today). Now God is about to set them free and allow them to return to their homeland. We'll hear the words "the way of the Lord" frequently in today's readings. It refers to the route by which the Lord would lead his people home. It would be a passage through mountains and desert, a passage that most likely passed through the modern day countries of Iraq and Syria and Lebanon. Isaiah announces this return by calling the people to prepare. Over five hundred years later, John the Baptist would use the same words to call the people of his own day to prepare for the Messiah. Today, Advent calls us to prepare not only for Christmas but also for the day when Christ will call us to leave this world and to be part of his eternal kingdom.

HOMILY: Recently I read a letter from a pastor who said that while he was in the seminary, he taught a class on the history of the Old Testament to prisoners. One evening while he was waiting for a prison guard to come and check him in, he noticed a man waiting in line ahead of him who was fidgeting and constantly checking his watch. The young seminary student thought that man needed a tranquilizer. Finally the guard came. The man hastily scribbled his name in the visitors' book and rushed inside. What does that man do, the seminary student asked. The guard answered: "he teaches a course on serenity through meditation."

The story struck me as an image of many of us at this time of the year. We sing of silent night, peace on earth, joy to the world. At the same time we rush around frantically, doing ten things at once while we're mentally trying to figure out how we're going to do the next ten things on our list!

Last week our Lord told us to be watchful, to be alert, to be ready for his coming, not his coming as a baby, but his coming in glory at the end. After I made some suggestions last week of some spiritual things people might do during Advent, I thought perhaps I would see lot of new faces at morning Mass or Holy Hour! But that was not the case. I know not everyone can get to Mass or Holy Hour, but hopefully more people are spending some extra quiet time at home reading the scriptures or praying or maybe more people are doing some extra good works.

Today the scriptures give us a similar message: "prepare." We all know we won't be ready for anything important unless we prepare. Maybe we're already ready to meet our Maker, I hope I am and I hope you are too, but maybe there's a little room for improvement in a few of us.

One of the cartoons this week was very clever. Garfield the cat was listening to a Christmas carol and as he listened he said: "Ah, the first Christmas carol of the season. It hard to believe that in just three short weeks I'm gonna be sick of that sucker." We don't like to wait. We want to get to Christmas without having to wait.

But Advent is a time of waiting. It's not passive waiting like when we were students in school and we kept looking at the clock waiting for the school bell to ring. It's active waiting, like a recently married husband and wife expecting the birth of their first child, trying to get ready for the great event. St. Peter reminds us everything we know will disappear for us some day and since that is going to happen, "what sort of persons ought you to be?" Paul asks. He answers his own question: we should be the sort of person who conducts ourselves "in holiness and devotion..."

Christmas is a day we must prepare for in a spiritual manner if we want to experience the spiritual joy of God's great love and be more ready to welcome his future coming. Otherwise when Christmas day ends we'll be saying to ourselves: "Boy, am I glad that's over." Christmas will be for any of us only what we make of it. Amen.

Feast of the Immaculate Conception December 8, 2005

(Gen. 3,9-15,20; Luke 1,26-38) The feast today is about Mary's conception, that from the instant she began to exist on this earth, indeed from her very conception, she was holy, filled with God's grace and without sin. The gospel today can confuse us somewhat because it tells us about Jesus' conception. It was read today, first of all, because there is no gospel telling us about the moment when Mary was conceived. And secondly today's gospel does give us an important piece of information about Mary related to today's feast. The angel greeted her as: "Full of grace." Our feast celebrates what the angel stated. There was no moment in Mary's life when God's grace did not fill her. She was full of grace.

As we listen in on this conversation between Mary and the Angel, we learn not only about Mary but also about the child she is going to have. Mary's son to be would be Son of the Most High and king forever. Her child will be called "holy, the Son of God." In the midst of all our business, we pause on this Holy Day to think what it is we are happy about at this time of year.

This is why Mary was "full of grace," so she could give birth to the source of all holiness and grace, God's own Son. And why did he come to us? So that we too can become holy. This is what St. Paul tells us in today's second reading: "God chose us in him to be holy and blameless in his sight."

Holiness is something few people strive for. All of us want to get to heaven, but most of us would probably tend to say I just want to get inside the door. We should do more than just try to get inside the door. We are called to be holy. Most of us never think that becoming holy is our vocation. We usually think holiness is for someone else, like the saints or people in religious orders. That's because we do not understand holiness. We think being holy means spending all day praying or wearing ourselves out doing good things for others and never having a chance to have any fun. I think holy people probably have as much fun as any of us, but there's something greater than fun. It is joy and peace and love. To be holy means to be close to God. The closer we are to God, the more we will be filled with love and joy and peace - both in this life and throughout eternity.

Our vocation to holiness is illustrated by the two stories we heard today.

The first story was about our first parents who originally were very close to God and were very happy. That was the symbolism of the Garden of Eden. But that wasn't good enough for them. They wanted to be like God himself. So they rebelled against God and they lost all they had.

The second story, the annunciation, illustrates Mary's constant attitude of being willing to say "yes" to God. It was only through her openness that the Son of the Most High has come to us. St. Luke tells us Mary was not only holy and always ready to do whatever God wanted of her, but he also tells us she was joyful. Holiness and joy are connected. After the angel left Mary, St. Luke told us about Mary visiting her cousin and she was full of joy. She expressed her joy in the beautiful hymn "the Magnificat." My soul gives glory to the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior."

In reflecting on the holiness of Mary, we may feel as if we were treated unfairly. We were born with original sin. The deck was stacked against us from the beginning. But we forget that when we were baptized we were filled with God's life. The very same grace that filled Mary at the moment of her conception, filled us when we were baptized. So holiness is possible for us too. Our two stories can show us there are two ways each of us can go in life. We can follow the example of our first parents, Adam and Eve, or we can follow the example of Mary. The first will lead to sorrow, the other to joy. To imitate Mary, all we have to do is say "yes" to whatever God asks of us.

3rd Sunday of Advent December 11, 2005

INTRODUCTION: (Isaiah 61, 1-2a. 10-11; I Thessalonians 5, 16-24; John 1, 6-8. 19-28) As the celebration of Christ's birth draws near, joy is in the air. It's also reflected in today's liturgy. The prophet speaking to us in our first reading tells us he was sent to bring glad tidings to the poor, that he rejoices in the Lord, and in God is the joy of his soul. The response, which is almost always from the Book of Psalms, is today taken from St. Luke's gospel. It is Mary's hymn of joy which she enthusiastically proclaimed when she visited her cousin Elizabeth after the annunciation. St. Paul in the second reading tells us to rejoice always. His instruction "rejoice" implies that rejoicing is more of a choice in attitude rather than a feeling that spontaneously comes over us. John the Baptist, whom we meet in the gospel, was an austere person, but his message was a joyful one, joyful because the Lord was coming. John was honored to have been chosen by God to point him out and to prepare the people for that coming.

HOMILY: John the Baptist announced the coming of the Lord. And I announce to you the coming of Sister Ann who will make an appeal for the Retirement for Religious at the end of Mass. So I will try to keep my remarks brief.

Recently I read a book about Mother Theresa and in the spirit of today's liturgy, a spirit of joy, I would like to make a couple of comments about her. She was once asked if she ever got discouraged. She answered that she is always happy. "Discouragement comes from pride,"

she always said. "We must be people of hope. It's not success that matters to God but faithfulness. Never stop trying."

You can imagine she had a lot of problems and cares in her ministry, yet she did not worry about yesterday or tomorrow. She often said, "Do what you can, do it now and do it well." People of all walks of life, of every social standing and position went to her. She always gave them what she referred to as her business card. It was one of the most profound, yet simple, statements of the spiritual life I have ever come across. It said: "The fruit of silence is prayer. The fruit of prayer is faith. The fruit of faith is love. The fruit of love is service. And the fruit of service is peace." Have you got my business card she would ask. First of all she gave God her time, then she gave people her time, her faith and her tender charity and all went away from her with hope.

In a letter she wrote to a member of her community, we hear echoes of St. Paul who told us in today's second reading, "Rejoice always." She wrote, "Do not be afraid, Jesus said. Put your hand in his hand and walk with him all the way. Keep the joy of loving Jesus in your heart, and share this joy with all you meet." Amen.

Fourth Sunday of Advent December 18, 2005

INTRODUCTION: 2 Samuel 7,1-5, 8b-12, 14a,16; Luke 1,26-38

Our first reading goes back 1000 years before Christ to the time of king David in Jerusalem. You need to recall that when Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt, almost 300 years before King David, God gave the people a special sign of his presence among them. That sign was the Arc of the Covenant. It looked something like this: a box in which were placed the 10 Commandments, a lid of gold and on the lid were two angels. The box was carried by two long poles because no one could touch the Arc. The two angels provided a throne for their invisible God, Yahweh. As Moses and the people moved through the desert and eventually into the promised land, the Arc was kept in a tent. Only designated people, and eventually only the high priest, could enter the tent and offer sacrifice to God. The Arc was still kept in a tent during the reign of King David. David had built himself a nice comfortable palace and he decided it was not right that the Arc, the special sign of God's presence with his people, was still kept in a tent. So he told his prophet, Nathan, that he would build a temple, a house for God. Nathan said "good idea," but God said "no." God said David had shed too much blood in his role as king, so he would have David's son, Solomon, build the temple after David died. But God was pleased with David's idea and blessed him. One of the special blessings David received was that David's line would never die out. One of his descendants would always be king over God's people. That's what is meant by the statement that God would "establish a house" for David. For about 400 years this proved to be true. Always the king of Judea was of the royal house of David. When the Babylonians conquered the Jews, that was the end of the kingship. But the Jews never forgot the promise God made to David and always waited for one who would come from David's family who would rescue God's people from their enemies and restore the kingdom to Israel. Since kings were anointed when they assumed power, the king they looked for was called the anointed one - the Hebrew word for "anointed one" is Messiah, in Greek the word is Christos. In the gospel of the annunciation, the angel Gabriel

informs Mary that her son would be the fulfillment of these hopes. "The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

HOMILY: The angel Gabriel announced the birth of a king: "the Lord God will give him the throne of David, his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." I love the interesting way St. Luke begins to tell us about this. He first of all introduces Mary, but not in the usual way we introduce someone. We would have said, "I would like you to meet Mary. She's from Galilee and engaged to be married to Joseph." None of us would have dared to add to our introduction: "She's a virgin!" But it's a very important thing St. Luke wants us to know and he tells us she's a virgin even before he tells us Mary's name. Why? Because Mary would conceive in a miraculous way, through the power of the Holy Spirit. That alone was spectacular, but that was only the beginning of the most unique and wonderful event this world would ever see. This king, who would be conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, would be more than the ordinary, run of the mill king. This king, the messiah, the christos; that is, the anointed one, would be king over a kingdom that would never end. To top that, because he was conceived by God's own Spirit, he would be the "Son of God."

This is an awesome mystery that God took on our human flesh and became like us in every way except sin. There is a special theological term for it: the Incarnation. The God, who dwelt among his people housed in a tent for many generations, now comes to live with his people as one of us, taking on our own flesh and blood. Sometimes people like to say Jesus was a great prophet or a great teacher or a great humanitarian but that's all he was. The gospels tell us he is the Son of God. If he was less than that, there was nothing great about him because he was a crazy man, full of delusion and paranoia. There is no in-between position we can take on Jesus. [In today's bulletin is a copy of the Catholic Update that gives a beautiful explanation of today's gospel. I highly recommend it.]

How we live our faith depends on how firmly we believe in this wonderful event. If we truly believe God has come into our world and into our lives through Jesus, shouldn't we try to spend time with him, shouldn't we try to get to know him better and follow him as well as possible? If we are not ready to do that, could it be that our faith is little more than a lot of words?

One last thought. I would like you to notice the respect God showed Mary in the annunciation. God didn't just tell her she would be the mother of such an awesome person. God asked her if she would be and waited for her answer. We have here a cue for how the Son of God can come to us more fully. We have here a cue for how Christmas can fully fill our hearts. We have here a cue for how to enjoy the blessings of his kingdom that will have no end. God's Son wants to live in each of us. As God did with Mary, God waits for each of us to answer him as to whether he is welcome. Are we able to say as Mary did: "I am the servant of the Lord. I will do whatever you want of me, Oh God."

Christmas
December 25, 2005

We just heard the story of Jesus' birth. We've heard it over and over, yet our hearts rejoice to hear it again. Our God came to us, not in majesty and glory, blinding us with his brilliance and deafening us with the sound of his voice. Our God came to us in humility and poverty and simplicity. He showed us, by sharing in our life, that there is goodness in the world he created, goodness in the life he gave us, goodness in all of us and that we are worth saving, even worth dying for. Words alone cannot express the wonders we celebrate today. And so we express our words in song. No celebration throughout the year has so many songs dedicated to it. It is a time for singing. But to celebrate today's feast, even singing is inadequate. We put up statues picturing Jesus' birth. They help us understand more fully God's humble coming to us. We thank St. Francis for that. He tried to think of a special way to celebrate God's love, a way that even the youngest child could understand. So, one day he asked one of his friends to prepare a cave with a manger filled with straw and animals in the cave. There were no statues there, not even a statue of baby Jesus. It was just a stable with live animals, an ox, a donkey and sheep, similar to the stable of Bethlehem where Jesus was born. He placed an altar over the manger, so people would make the connection in their minds that just as Jesus came to us as a human, he comes to us today as our food and our drink. St. Francis was a deacon. When Mass was celebrated at midnight that year, he read the gospel and preached of God's love and Jesus' birth. Some people even saw the baby Jesus lying in the crib and they saw Francis pick up the baby and hold it. Francis, who also gave us the stations of the cross, has helped to bring Christmas alive for all of us through the Christmas crib.

I always look for a story to help us see in a new way what Christmas is all about. This is a story by a writer named Barbara Baumgardner. Barbara's husband died and her first Christmas without him was not joyful. It was very painful for her. During the following year her pain in losing her husband began to heal and the second Christmas after he died, she began to get excited that Christmas was coming and she decided to celebrate it with her two daughters. They both lived out of town but she invited them to her home for a big Christmas dinner. She had decorated everything in sight, baked lots of goodies and had Christmas music playing on the CD. Her house looked, smelled and sounded like Christmas. Three days before Christmas her first daughter called and had frozen water pipes at home and couldn't come. She had to take care of the mess the frozen pipes caused. Within twenty minutes Barbara's second daughter, who lived on a farm, called and said in her area the wind chill factor was 45 below zero and they had farm animals which she had to care for, so she couldn't come. Barbara would have gone to visit her daughter in a minute, but Barbara was stuck at home. She had already invited a few neighbors to join her family on Christmas. Her brother-in-law, who was recently widowed, along with his 84 year old mother was coming, and a young single man from church, and the widow next door who had just gotten out of the hospital, and she had promised to bring a plate of food to the old man across the street. She didn't invite him because he was always so filthy and smelled like stale cigars. She was going to let everyone join her family dinner on Christmas and now there was no family. She suddenly felt very much alone and was feeling very sorry for herself. She complained to God that he was not fair. Her family wasn't coming and she was stuck having to entertain all those other people. She kept asking God why he let her invite all those other people when he knew her family wouldn't be able to be with her on Christmas. In the silence of her misery she began to hear God answer her complaints. God said, "I know it's Christmas, Barbara; it's my birthday. What did you get me?" "What, God, what do you mean?" she asked. "Whose birthday is it?" he insisted.

“What did you get me?” Well, Barbara started thinking “What can I get you, Lord? Maybe I can be nicer to my neighbor, maybe instead of just taking food to that smelly old man across the street, I can invite him and his dog to come and have dinner with us. It would blow his mind! Maybe I can invite someone from the homeless shelter and the checker at the grocery store who will probably be alone on Christmas.” Before long she said her party was full, but not as full as her heart. She said she did not remember having so much fun on Christmas as the day she gave her Christmas to Jesus as a birthday gift.

Many people today want to take Christ out of Christmas and just celebrate for some other reason. That’s their loss. The heart of our celebration is God’s love shown to us in Jesus Christ. We are grateful to the gospel writers for telling us about that blessed event. We are grateful to St. Francis for helping to make it more concrete for us through the crib. We are grateful for the composers of music who have helped us put our joy into song. We are grateful to all of you who have come to make this a special celebration today. Amen.