

2nd Sunday of Advent

December 6, 2009

INTRODUCTION: In today's first reading, we hear from Baruch, the secretary of Jeremiah the prophet. He lived during the Babylonian exile over 500 years before Christ. When the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, they destroyed everything and took most of its citizens to Babylon as captives. Our first reading has as its background this experience of the exile. Baruch speaks to the demolished city of Jerusalem and tells it to rejoice, for it will prosper again. If they look east (toward Babylon) they will see God gathering his people together to bring them back home. It is indeed a message of hope. Another prophet, Isaiah, also wrote about this return of God's people from exile and we hear that passage quoted in today's gospel.

HOMILY: I want to start with a brief history lesson which many of you may know already, but it won't hurt to hear it again. The Babylonian exile took place 587 years before Christ. Many Jews were killed, of course, when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem. Those Jews who lived through the invasion of the Babylonians were enslaved and transported to Babylon. Babylon was located in modern day Iraq, less than 100 miles south of Baghdad. For 700 years the Jews had lived in their own land and for almost 440 years they had their own king. God spoke through his prophets that this exile was not to last, but that he would bring his people home again. And so we heard Baruch and Isaiah speak words of hope to God's people at this difficult time. The prophets encouraged them to continue believing and trusting in God. Not quite 50 years later, Babylon was conquered by the Persians (which is modern day Iran). The king of Persia (Cyrus) gave permission for the Jews to return to their homeland. You have seen enough news' programs, I'm sure, to know what the terrain is like in that area. There were ancient roads along the rivers but there was also lots of wilderness and mountains and deserts. We must remember the promise of return is in poetic form, thus the prophets tell the people God would bring them back on royal thrones, the mountains would be made low, the rugged ways would be smoothed out, the valleys would be filled in and everyone would know God was saving his people. The geography of the area really wasn't changed, but the invitation to return home was no less magnificent. There's a slight shift of emphasis here with the phrase "in the desert." Now you have to pay close attention to notice it. The passage in the Hebrew version of Isaiah speaks of a voice, which would be the voice of a herald announcing the arrival of a king, which was a common custom at that time. The voice cries out: "in the desert prepare the way of the Lord." The Lord himself would come to lead his people home through desert wilderness, which was to be appropriately prepared for this journey.

The Greek version of Isaiah is punctuated differently, where it says: "A voice cries out in the desert: 'prepare the way of the Lord.'" This shows how a later inspired writer can see new meaning in a Scripture passage. John the Baptist took this second interpretation "a voice cries out in the desert: prepare the way of the Lord" and applied it to himself. This would make sense for John the Baptist to define himself in this way since he lived and preached in the desert wilderness of Judea as the gospels tell us. My father used this passage to describe himself; whenever he thought we were not agreeing with him or listening to him he used to say: "I'm just

'a voice crying out in the wilderness...'and no one pays any attention to me." In John's case, a lot of people listened and responded. He was very popular and was even considered by many to be the Messiah. But he knew who he was and he claimed to be simply a messenger with the message: "prepare the way of the Lord." The Lord himself was coming to save his people and John was his herald.

The liturgy during Advent takes up the theme of John and applies it to us as we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Savior, Jesus. John, the ascetic that he was, wasn't talking about buying gifts or having parties, as enjoyable as this might be. If we read the gospels, we find out what John was talking about: repentance, changing our hearts; not taking our faith for granted or the fact that we can simply call ourselves Christians or Catholics, but living a good life and doing good works. We'll hear some more of the things he preached when we hear next Sunday's gospel. John spoke the truth and didn't mince words and that's what got him into trouble and led to his execution by Herod Antipas.

Our liturgy wants us to ask ourselves today what we need to do to live more fully as God wants us to. Jesus came to guide us to our true home. The Jews who were in Babylon for 50 years, for the most part, had never seen the land their parents and grandparents had to leave behind. They knew Babylon was not their true home. Even though we've never seen it, our true home is to be with God in eternal life. This is where the Lord is trying to take us. We know our time in this world is limited. St. Paul tells us "our citizenship is in heaven." It's where we all want to go, but not many of us are in a hurry to get there. It's up to us to prepare the way so the Lord can take us there. If we resist his lead, we'll lose out on the purpose for which God created us - to be with him. That would be the greatest tragedy that could ever happen to any of us. I would like to make a special plug for our Holy Hours on Wednesday morning and Friday afternoon and for our Solemn Annual Eucharistic Devotions which take place next weekend. Adoration of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament would certainly help us with our spiritual preparations for Christmas. May all the prophets, and especially John the Baptist, help us to know what Advent is all about. May their message of hope and their call to prepare be more than just a voice crying out in the wilderness. Amen.

Feast of the Immaculate Conception

December 8, 2009

In the first three chapters of the book of Genesis, we hear about the creation of the world and all things in it. The story of creation is not meant to be a documentary that gives us an accurate historical or scientific account. It's not something that was witnessed by CNN and is now being reported on. It is a theology lesson put in story form that tells us as much about God as it does about creation. There are really two stories about creation. The first story puts God's work in the framework of seven days while the second story is more focused on the creation of our first parents and their relationship with God. It was a beautiful, loving and harmonious relationship

they had with God until the devil came along disguised as a serpent. The devil was jealous of our first parents and their closeness to God, so the devil talked them into rebelling against God. Thus as St. Paul said: "sin entered into the world," a sin that seems to have become part of our DNA. This is what we call "Original Sin." It's not like some "thing" attached to us, rather it is more like a lack of something, something important is missing, which is the original grace which God blessed us with at the time of creation. This Original Sin is a kind of tendency in all of us to pride, selfishness, self-centeredness. It leads us to rebel against God like our first parents did. We see signs of it everywhere. If we read the whole passage in Genesis, we see that sin affected not only our first parents' relationship with God, but it affected their relationship with each other - they felt shame in the presence of one another. It affected their relationship with the rest of creation - they lost the joy they had in the Garden of Eden and had to struggle with the rest of creation in order to survive. Our first reading does not go into all that. The part of the story that we heard in our first reading has the purpose of pointing out to us that, although we sin, God does not want us to remain in a state of alienation from him. Instead God would rescue the human race from this predicament we find ourselves in. So what we heard in our first reading was an announcement of good news for all of us. God spoke to the serpent, the devil, the evil one and said: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and hers." Enmity: in other words, all our lives we would be struggling with evil. In a poetic way God announces that evil would not win in the struggle. He told the serpent: you might strike at his heel (i.e. you might be able to do some harm to the offspring of the woman) but he will strike at your head (which would imply a fatal blow). The powers of evil will not triumph even though they often seem to. Yet sin is a powerful force, one that humanity is unable to conquer by its own power, its own cleverness, its own politics, its own laws. And so God sent his Son to come to our rescue. God's Son took on our human nature to show us the way back to a loving and harmonious relationship with God. He came to us through a woman whose goodness and holiness was not tainted by this sin that touches all the rest of us. She was full of grace from the very first moment of her existence. God did not think it fitting for the mother of his Son to be touched by sin for she would give birth to the One who would destroy sin and death in us by his own death and resurrection. When Mary was asked if she would be the mother of our Savior and Lord she answered: "May it be done to me according to your word." The answer she gave was the way she lived her whole life: always ready to say "yes" to whatever God asked of her. And so Jesus came to us, he was born, he taught, he healed, he forgave sins, he cast out demons, he died for us. Before he left us to return to the Father he gave us the sacraments to help us overcome sin and to be renewed in God's life. As we honor the Immaculate Virgin Mary, we pray she may inspire us and help us to stay close to God and in his grace by always saying "yes" to God as she did. Amen.

3rd Sunday of Advent

December 13, 2009

INTRODUCTION: Our theme for today, as it often is, is summed up in the Psalm Refrain: "Cry

out with joy and gladness, for among you is the great and holy one of Israel.” Our first reading from the prophet Zephaniah goes back about 700 years before Christ. The Assyrians were the dominant force in the Middle East and were an unusually warlike, brutal people. Their capital city was in northern Iraq near modern day Mosul. Our first reading comes from a time shortly after the Assyrians wiped out the northern part of Israel. They brought severe suffering upon the southern part of Israel too, the area around Jerusalem, but they did not conquer it. Jerusalem would still be around for another 130 years until the Babylonians conquered it. But the Assyrians did inflict a lot of pain on Jerusalem. Yet Jerusalem didn’t learn from what happened to them. Idolatry and immorality were rampant among the Jews. The king of Judah himself offered his own son as a human sacrifice to the pagan gods. Most of what is written in the Book of Zephaniah records his efforts to correct abuses among God’s people. His book ends on a note of hope, however, as he addresses those who are faithful to God. He tells them to rejoice and assures them God will rejoice and sing too because of his love for them and for all the blessings that will be theirs. Can we imagine how beautiful it would be to hear God singing?

There is something we should be aware of when we hear the second reading too. St. Paul is sitting in prison somewhere when he wrote this, and prisons in those days were really bad. Today’s prisons would look like a luxury hotel by comparison. Yet Paul can be joyful and he is able to encourage the Philippians to have no anxiety and to rejoice always.

HOMILY: In the days when we had Mass in Latin, today was known as Gaudete Sunday. That means “Be Joyful.” The liturgy continues to communicate that theme of joy with rose colored vestments and readings telling us to rejoice. So on this Gaudete Sunday, I thought we should start off with a couple of laughs.

First is about a guy driving down a country road and hears a loud thud. He gets out of the car and there is not another car in sight. So he drives on home. The next day the sheriff shows up at his door and arrests him for a hit and run accident. He ran over a pig and didn’t stop and that was against the law. He protested it wasn’t him and asked the sheriff how he could possibly know he was guilty. The sheriff said: “the pig squealed.”

The local minister had to give a talk at a banquet and told a few funny stories. There was a news reporter there taking notes. The minister planned to give the same talk the next day at a meeting and asked the reporter not to print his jokes and stories in the newspaper the next day. So the well-meaning reporter ended his article with the following observation: “The minister told a few stories that cannot be published.”

It’s good to have a sense of humor and enjoy a few laughs but it’s even better to have a sense of joy in our hearts. Laughter may fade away, but joy stays with us. We heard the prophet Zephaniah in today’s first reading telling God’s people, during an especially difficult time in their history, to “sing for joy.” They should sing for joy, not because things were wonderful, but because God was in their midst. We heard Paul, in prison, telling the Philippians to rejoice always. If we listen to the media, we get the impression that joy springs from having lots of things. The scriptures tell us our joy comes from knowing the Lord is in our midst. We have an

advantage over the Jews of Zephaniah's time (700 years before Christ) because we also know and believe we will enjoy being with God for all eternity. The Jews had no knowledge of heaven or hell at that time, so we have more reasons to rejoice than even holy prophets.

If we don't have joy within us, perhaps some of these enemies of joy might be at work stealing it from us: * Feeling sorry for oneself. * Constantly putting other people down to make ourselves look smarter or better. * Putting ourselves down all the time. Because we're human we all make mistakes or do wrong. There are healthy ways of dealing with guilt or shame. Incidentally, the sacrament of confession is one of those ways – and this week we have four priests to hear confession at our Penance Service. Constantly beating ourselves up, though, does not get rid of guilt and it does not help us experience joy. * Holding on to anger and resentment. It only eats us up inside and does not produce joy. We have to forgive. * Thinking that having more things is going to make us happy. It satisfies us only momentarily. * And then there's fear and worry. Paul says have no anxiety at all. That might sound impossible, but there are ways we create anxiety for ourselves that we do not need. On the other hand there are many things that cause us anxiety, which we can do nothing about and we have to leave in God's hands.

If self pity, guilt, unforgiveness, anger, resentment, fear, and worry work against our having joy, then what will lead to joy? We must choose to be joyful. Paul tells the Philippians "rejoice" as if it is something for them to choose to do rather than it being something that just happens to them. I think it was Abraham Lincoln who said most people are about as happy as they make up their minds to be. Dr. Hans Selye, the scientist who developed and researched the concept of stress, would agree. He said: it's generally not the things outside of us that create stress for us, but it's the way we respond to these things. Next we need to be good and to do good. Otherwise we won't feel good about ourselves. The people in today's gospel ask the Baptist, "what should we do?" John gave them a few specific ideas. All we have to do is read the gospels or the 10 Commandments and we'll get the idea that there's more to a good life than just saying "I believe!" Lastly, I think gratitude is the final key to unlocking the way to joy. Again, being grateful is an intentional thing; it is an attitude we must develop. St. Paul said: "in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God." A heart that is ungrateful is not happy. This is not all that could be said about joy, but it's probably enough for us to think about today. My closing words for today are don't make yourselves so anxious this season that you lose the joy that can be found only in knowing Jesus' love. "The Lord, your God, is in your midst."

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 20, 2009

INTRODUCTION: Micah 5, 1-4a; Hebrews 10, 5-10; Luke 1, 39-45

Approximately 700 years before Christ, the Assyrian's were the dominant power in the Middle East. Their capital was in what is today, northern Iraq. The Assyrian army was powerful and was legendary for its savagery. After they had destroyed the northern half of Israel, they moved

against Jerusalem. Naturally the citizens of Jerusalem were terrified. We hear in today's first reading words of hope spoken to God's people by the prophet Micah. He promises salvation would come out of an unimportant little village about seven miles south of Jerusalem named Bethlehem. This prophecy from Micah was the Old Testament passage the Jewish leaders quoted when the Magi came to Jerusalem looking for the newborn king of the Jews. Bethlehem had been the birthplace of King David 300 years before the prophet Micah. According to the prophet it would be the birthplace of the future savior of God's people whose greatness would reach to the ends of the earth. What an amazing prophecy coming from 700 years before Christ and what an amazing way in which God fulfilled it!

HOMILY

You can tell we are getting near Christmas by the traditional greeting that shoppers give each other in the mall: "I think I was next."

Red Skelton's recipe for a good marriage was: "We always hold hands. If I let go, she shops."

After the angel appeared to Mary and announced to her that God wanted her to be the mother of the long awaited Messiah, the angel informed Mary that her aged relative, Elizabeth, who had wanted all her life to have a baby was now going to have one. Mary, St. Luke tells us, traveled in haste to be with her relative.

Elizabeth's having a child at an advanced age was a sign that, as the angel said to Mary, "nothing is impossible with God." It was also a sign that her child would be very special. Remember Sara, wife of Abraham, did not have a child until she was well advanced in age. This was also the true of the mother of Samson and Hanna, the mother of the prophet Samuel. Elizabeth's child, John the Baptist, indeed was a special person. He was to be the one to announce the coming of the Messiah, and already, before his birth he shows signs of his special role as he leaps for joy as Mary, and Jesus within her, approaches.

Notice the greeting of Elizabeth: "blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb." That greeting along with the greeting of the angel to Mary at the annunciation: "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you," makes up the first part of the Hail Mary - a prayer that took its present form about 1000 years ago.

The part of this gospel that struck me was the statement that after Elizabeth's child leapt for joy, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. This enabled her to recognize Mary's secret and greet her as she did: Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Mary had just been visited by the angel. Remember, Luke said she went with haste to visit Elizabeth. There would be no evidence that she had conceived, but Elizabeth knew it. It was because she had been filled with the Holy Spirit.

Jesus comes to us in so many ways, but without the Holy Spirit we are unable to recognize him. But when the Holy Spirit enlightens us, we know the Spirit is present. The Spirit helps us see him present in creation, in the Eucharist, in one another, in perhaps the person who drives us

crazy, in the poor and suffering and in the unborn who are like Jesus was at that moment in Mary, entirely vulnerable, without a voice to speak or cry out.

One example of how the Holy Spirit helped me to know the presence of Jesus was in the Scriptures. So many times I have experienced reading the Scriptures and a particular verse spoke to me with such power that I knew instinctively it was something Jesus wanted me to hear and learn from. It spoke to me not, just in my head as a thought, but it spoke in my heart as something I could feel with my whole being. I still remember the first time it happened. I was in my first year in the seminary, feeling somewhat lonely and homesick, and I just opened the Scriptures to Matthew. I read where Jesus said, "All the hairs on your head are counted. So do not be afraid." (Mt. 10,30-31) Immediately I felt God's love and my troubled mood lifted. That's just one example of many times I've experienced our Lord through the Spirit.

As we celebrate the last week of Advent, may we be inspired by the Spirit to see beyond all the busyness and stress at this time and know the presence of Jesus with us as we celebrate his birth. Amen.

Christmas

December 25, 2009

On Christmas night the local minister's wife collapsed on the couch and said to her husband "I am really exhausted." He said "You're exhausted! How about me? I had two Christmas Eve services and three services this morning to do; that's five sermons. Why are you so tired?" She replied: "I had to listen to all of them, dear!" (from The Joyful Noiseletter, Dec. 2000)

I would like to offer a few suggestions for Christmas gifts: To one who has hurt you: forgiveness. To someone who drives you crazy: tolerance and patience. To a friend: your heart. To a customer: service. To all: charity. To every child: good example. To yourself: respect. (adapted from Chicken Soup for the Soul, Christmas Treasury, pg 63)

It's instinctive for us to come together on this feast of our Lord's birth. It helps us to get to the heart of what all our other celebrations are all about and, in this gift giving season, to thank God for the greatest gift any of us could receive, the gift of God's love shown to us in the coming of Jesus into our lives.

If I tried to put into words the wonder of the mystery we celebrate, I would fail because the mystery of God's love and the gift of Jesus to us is beyond what words can describe. That's one reason we come to Mass every week - to try, in whatever little way we can, to grasp the awesomeness of the coming of our Savior to us. Because stories seem to touch us at a deeper level than other words, we often resort to telling stories at this time.

So my story takes place on Christmas day way out west in California. (story can be found in A

World of Stories for Preachers and Teachers by William J. Bausch, pg 458) This Christmas day occurred a few years ago on a Sunday. A family, mother, father and three children, 10, 6 and an infant one year old were traveling from St. Francisco along the California coast to Los Angeles. They lived in Los Angeles and had been visiting family members in San Francisco. It happened that Dennis, the father, had to be at work on Monday morning and that's why they were on the road going home on Christmas day. Mom tells the story. When it got later in the afternoon, we looked for a restaurant and felt lucky to find one that was open on Christmas. There were just a few people in the restaurant when we all came in. We got settled at a table and ordered. Suddenly our one year old, Christopher, started getting very excited. He let out a few joyful squeals and started pounding on his metal high chair with his fat little hands. His eyes were wide open and his toothless mouth opened into a big grin. Mom continues on: I started looking around to see what was exciting Christopher and half way to the door sat the object of his excitement, a bum with grimy, dirty clothes, needing a shave, worn out baggy pants and shoes and the appearance that maybe he had had a couple too many beers. I found him repulsive but there he was, waving across the room at Christopher, shouting "hi there big fella." Suddenly he started playing: "Peek a boo" and "Patty cake." Christopher really enjoyed all the attention while the rest of us were totally embarrassed. The few other people in the restaurant looked annoyed. We finished dinner in record time as all this was going on and Dennis went to pay the bill. I gathered Christopher in my arms and headed toward the door – but I had to pass the old man and prayed I could get by him without incident. Christopher, however, had his eyes riveted on his new best friend and when I got near the old man Christopher almost jumped out of my arms with his arms outstretched. For just a split second, I noticed the man's eyes, beseeching me to let him hold Christopher. I handed him to the man and he held Christopher so gently. The man's eyes were closed and there were a few tears on his cheeks as he cradled and rocked Christopher in his arms for a few moments. Christopher didn't want to leave, but the man gave him back to me. He said "God bless you, Ma'am. You've just made my Christmas. Take good care of him." A little choked up, I said I would and left him saying to myself "God forgive me."

A little baby comes to us tonight with his arms outstretched to embrace us in our sad state, with our tattered lives, our tattered hurts, our tattered relationships and our tattered sins. He embraces us by taking on our human flesh; he embraces us in accepting poverty and suffering to save us; he embraces us by giving himself to us in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

If we are here tonight knowing we have been embraced by Christ's love, and if, like the rag-tag shepherds that we are, we are here rejoicing and praising God for his love, then we have captured the mystery of Christmas: God-with-us, Emmanuel, has loved us greatly. May you experience the peace, love, comfort and joy of God's embrace this day and throughout this Christmas season. Amen.