

2nd Sunday of Advent - C Cycle December 6, 2015

Baruch 5, 1-9; Philippians 1, 4-6.8-11; Lk. 3, 1-6; **INTRODUCTION:** When we hear today's first reading, the psalm response, and the gospel, we need to hold in our mind the Babylonian exile. In 587 BC the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, the Temple, and enslaved thousands of Jews and took them as exiles to Babylon, 700 miles away (which is Iraq today). Try walking that 700 miles through mountains and desert. Baruch (our first reading) promises God would bring his people home. Just remember this is poetry so you will find his description of the return is greatly exaggerated (such as being lifted high as on royal thrones, and the mountains being leveled down). The psalm refrain is a song of rejoicing after the exile has ended – some 50 years later. 500 years after the exile we are in the era of Jesus and John the Baptist. In our gospel today, John the Baptist borrows Isaiah's description of the return from exile, also in poetic language, and applied Isaiah's words to his own ministry. John was a voice in the desert calling all people to prepare themselves for the salvation God was about to make known to all flesh.

HOMILY: Our gospel ends by saying "all flesh shall see the salvation of God." There are about 7.3 billion people in the world today. The population increases at a rate of 200,000 people a day. How is God going to accomplish that "all flesh shall see the salvation of God?" We can see God at work through John the Baptist who had the job of revealing God's saving love until he was martyred by Herod Antipas. John and Jesus had worked together for a time, then when John was gone, Jesus, with great compassion and miraculous powers, continued the mission of the Baptist calling people to repentance. When Jesus eventually returned to his Father in heaven, he commissioned his apostles to continue on with his mission to save the world. The Apostles passed that mission on to others (such as St. Nicholas whose feast is today). Through millions of other Apostles and evangelists, the saving work of God continues even to this very day and will continue on until all God's work is done, a work that we share. The Church continues to call people to repentance and to prepare their hearts for the salvation of God. For example, our Holy Father, Pope Francis, declared a Jubilee Year of Mercy, which begins this Tuesday. Pope Francis calls mercy "the bridge that connects God and God's people, opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness. It is the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us." *Misericordiae Vultus 1-3* We will soon be celebrating God's coming to meet us 2000 years ago, which is an event most worthy of celebration. He will come to meet us at the end of time to gather his faithful ones into his kingdom. He comes to meet us in our everyday lives day after day, in our prayers and in our work, in our joys and even in our crosses. As we prepare to celebrate with love and joy his coming 2000 years ago, let us seek through prayer or reading or doing good works to meet him with greater love each day. In this way you will be a part of God's work by which it may eventually happen that "all flesh shall see the salvation of God." Amen.

Feast of the Immaculate Conception - C Cycle December 8, 2015

The story of Adam and Eve is the story of each human person. We all struggle to do what's right; we all fail at times. Our failure to live as God calls us to is called "sin." None of us enjoys thinking of ourselves as sinners. To do so makes us feel badly about ourselves. But each time we come to Mass, we admit that we are. That doesn't mean we are bad people, it means that we are not perfect people. We are human. One of the images of sin in the Old Testament is the description of missing the mark, like someone trying to hit the bullseye. Whether we are using a bow and

arrow or throwing a baseball or a bowling ball, or whatever, we don't always hit the bullseye or throw a strike. We sometimes miss. This is one of the ways the Old Testament sees sin. As I said, it doesn't mean we are bad, it means we are not perfect – we are human. And we begin our lives that way. That's what the story of Adam and Eve tells us. God created us to be good, but he didn't create us to be robots – he gave us a free will, hoping we would be good because we choose to be. God knew the only way we would be able to love is if we choose to love. But God took a gamble, that if we were free, we might choose not to love. We might choose to ignore him, forget him; we might choose to hurt others; we might choose to make up our own rules in life thinking we know more than God and choose not to obey what God tells us to do. To make wrong choices can really get us in trouble as it got Adam and Eve in trouble, as it can get us in trouble. God gave Adam and Eve everything they needed and wanted, but there was something he did forbid them to do – he knew it would hurt them; but they did it anyway – and that's when all our problems began.

God continued to love them just as he continues to love us when we fail. He's always ready to forgive us when we're sorry. That's what the Holy Father wants us to know by declaring the coming year a Jubilee Year of Mercy. God wants us to be happy just as he wanted Adam and Eve to be happy when he created them. His love is so great that he decided to send his Son to show us the way that leads to the holy and joyful life he wants us to have. To prepare the world for the coming of his Son, God created a woman to be his mother – a woman who never failed to love him or obey him. She was that way from the first instance she began to live. This is what the angel meant when he greeted her as “full of grace.” This is what the Immaculate Conception means. Mary did not always have life easy, but she always did what God asked her to do. When God asked her to be the mother of his Son, she said “I belong to God. I will do whatever he asks.”

One of the things God also asked of Mary was that she would be a mother to all of us. While Jesus was dying on the cross, she and one of Jesus' disciples whom Jesus dearly loved, stood nearby. Jesus said to his mother, “woman, behold your son.” He said to the disciple “behold your mother.” Jesus was, in those few words, creating a new family, a new people of God, who would love him and obey him as Mary did. We honor her today and ask her to help us to always choose to love and follow God as Mary did. Amen.

3rd Sunday of Advent - C Cycle December 13, 2015

Zephaniah 3, 14-18a; Philippians 4, 4-7; Luke 3, 10-18; **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, who lived in the land we now know as Iran, were the dominant force in the Middle East at that time. They were an exceptionally warlike and brutal people. Their capital city was near modern day Mosul. They had just destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel and were harassing the southern kingdom around Jerusalem when the prophet Zephaniah proclaimed today's first reading. (In the *Collegeville Bible Commentary*, Stuhlmüller places him during the reign of Josiah – 640-609 BC) Most of what is written in the Book of Zephaniah records his efforts to correct abuses among God's people. The part of the Book of Zephaniah that we hear today is addressed, however, to those who are faithful to God. He tells them not to lose hope, but to rejoice and he assures them God will rejoice and sing too because of his love for them and for all the blessings that will be theirs. Imagine how beautiful it would be to hear God singing.

When we come to the second reading, we need to be aware that as St. Paul was writing (or dictating) his letter, he was sitting in prison somewhere. Prisons in those days were really bad. Today's prisons would look like a five-star hotel in comparison. Yet, even as he sits in prison, Paul can be joyful and he is able to encourage the Philippians to have no anxiety and to rejoice always.

HOMILY: Two young brothers got to spend the night with their grandparents right before Christmas. At bedtime, the two boys knelt beside their bed to say their prayers when the older brother began praying at the top of his lungs: "Dear God, I need a new bicycle!" After repeating this three or four times, his younger brother leaned over and said "You don't need to shout, God isn't deaf." To which the older brother replied, "No, but Grandma is!"

Our readings today tell us to rejoice, to be glad – even in the midst of extreme suffering. As we are aware, that's quite a big order. Today is Gaudate Sunday. The name comes from the days when the Mass was in Latin and the entrance hymn began with the words: Gaudete in Domino semper: (rejoice in the Lord, always) and the hymn goes on with: "again I say rejoice."

The other day I saw a book for sale entitled *Real Happiness*. It sounded interesting, so I bought it. It is a very readable treatment of psychological studies on happiness. The author proposed that we all have an idea of what we really need to be happy, but the research that has occurred in the past ten or fifteen years indicates that often what we think we need, is not what we need. Then it describes seven paths to real happiness. I'm just going to identify a few of the items the book describes.

First off, the most basic lesson that research has taught us is that if we're not as happy as we would like to be, it is possible to increase our happiness. That is exactly the message we hear in today's scripture readings. The first and second reading and the psalm tell us to rejoice. That implies it is possible to rejoice, even during difficult times. God would not tell us to do what is impossible.

If you asked a dozen people: "what do you think you need to be happy?" I'll bet most of them would say: "more money." That might be true for many people, but research shows there comes a level of income (around \$75,000 a year) when more money doesn't really make for greater happiness. After noting some of the research that proves this, the author gave an example about a man named Billy Bob Harrell, who won \$31 million in a lottery. He enjoyed it until it became a major burden to him. He told a friend: it's the worst thing that ever happened to me" and he eventually ended his life by putting a gun to his head. A lot of people believe that marriage to the right person is the key to happiness. They found happy people tend to get married more than unhappy people. Research is showing that it's not marriage that leads to happiness, but it's happiness that seems to lead to marriage. Then there are those who are convinced that physical attractiveness is necessary for happiness. That probably comes from all the ads that try to convince us we need to be beautiful for people to love us. Again research does not support that idea. As an example, fashion models report much lower levels of happiness than the average person. Interestingly, on the whole, happy people consider themselves as being more beautiful and attractive than unhappy people. If you want to change how you feel about your appearance, don't waste time and money on cosmetic products; instead, commit yourself to becoming happier. All these things I've mentioned (more money, marriage, and good looks) contribute to about 10% of our happiness in life. One major factor that influences about 50% of our happiness is genetics. This was shown to be so through twin studies. We can't do much to change our genetics, but

obviously this means that a large portion of our happiness (perhaps up to 50 %) remains under our control.

I'm not trying to sell books and I'm not going to try to repeat the whole book, but I do have to mention the seven paths to happiness that the author describes. Each one of these is a chapter in itself. So here they are: CULTIVATING GRATITUDE (that, of course, includes gratitude toward God), KINDNESS AND COMPASSION, LIVING IN THE PRESENT MOMENT (aka mindfulness which is usually achieved through meditation), FOSTERING SELF COMPASSION, BOOSTING OPTIMISM, STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS, PRACTICING FORGIVENESS. I didn't point out all the areas where these seven paths overlap with our faith because this book is meant to teach good psychological principals, but I can see in most of these paths to happiness an overlap with what we have been taught by our faith. It's just that psychological research is backing up some of the things God has already spoken to us. Today he tells us to rejoice – for he is near. Amen.

Fourth Sunday of Advent - C Cycle December 20, 2015

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

Today's first reading goes back 700 years before Christ. The Assyrians were attacking Jerusalem. The prophet Micah was speaking words of hope to God's people during this siege. Micah promised salvation would come, and it would come from a savior whose origin was out of an unimportant little village just seven miles south of Jerusalem named Bethlehem. 300 years before, Bethlehem was the birthplace of King David. Notice how their savior was described - his greatness would reach to the ends of the earth. When the Magi came to Jerusalem looking for the newborn king of the Jews, 700 years later, this was the Scripture passage that guided them to where Jesus was. It is an amazing prophecy and an amazing way in which God fulfilled it!

HOMILY: In Advent we hear a lot about John the Baptist. That makes sense since Advent is a time to prepare for the celebration of Christ's birth, and God gave John the Baptist the mission to prepare the way of the Lord. Now that we are celebrating the last Sunday of Advent, our gospel tells us about some events that immediately preceded Jesus' birth. The gospel of Matthew is featured in liturgical year A, Mark in liturgical year B and Luke in liturgical year C. In year A, Matthew tells us about St. Joseph's dilemma when he finds out Mary is going to have a baby. In year B we hear the story of the Annunciation when the angel appears to Mary and asks her to be the mother of our Lord. This year, year C, we are told about Mary going to visit her cousin Elizabeth to share her happy news with Elizabeth and to help her older cousin for a few months until Elizabeth's baby arrives.

Elizabeth received a prophetic gift upon hearing Mary's voice and she was filled with the Holy Spirit. She knew, without being told, that Mary was to be the mother of the long-awaited Lord and Messiah of God's people. Her whole being was filled with joy. Mary too was filled with joy because the first words she spoke after greeting Elizabeth were: "my soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior..." These words are the beginning of the prayer we call the *Magnificat*, a prayer that those who say Vespers (Evening Prayer) say every day. Luke's gospel is often called the gospel of joy because it is a theme that continues to run through the entire gospel.

Whenever I say the rosary and meditate on the Joyful mystery of the Visitation in saying the rosary, I am impressed with Mary's humility. Here she was, chosen by God to be the mother of

the long-awaited Savior of God's people, the one promised to succeed King David 1000 years earlier. The one whose greatness would reach to the end of the earth and whose reign would be forever. Not only would he be Savior of the Jewish people, he would be Savior of the whole world. Here is Mary, having been told all of this, visiting her cousin to help her. She could have spent all her time sitting around thinking how important she was; instead she reached out to share her joy with her cousin and to help her because Elizabeth was much older and she would need her help. Mary's son would later teach his disciples this same lesson about service when he said "whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all." (*Mk. 10,43-44*).

As we meditate on Mary's visit to her cousin, I pray that all your visits with relatives and friends this Christmas season be joyful; may you know Christ to be among you as you come together; may you deepen your friendship with those you visit; and may your travels be safe. Amen.

Christmas December 25, 2015

INTRODUCTION: (*Isaiah 9,1-6.14; Titus 3,4-7; Luke 2,1-14*) In our first reading, we hear from Isaiah the prophet who lived 700 years before Christ. The king who reigned at the time of Isaiah refused to trust in God, and his policies brought darkness and gloom upon God's people. We hear Isaiah prophesy the birth of a king whose reign would bring peace and justice to God's people.

HOMILY: In 1905, a diamond was found in a South African mine. It weighed 1 1/3 pounds. That would be a little larger than a man's fist. One and a third pounds translates into 3,106 carats. No one had ever before known of a diamond of that size. What does one do with a diamond that large? It was decided to present the diamond to the King of England, King Edward VII. It was cut into 105 smaller diamonds, the two largest of which are among the jewels in the British crown. This is all factual. You can look it up on the internet under the name Cullinan diamond. The story gets even more interesting. They had to get the diamond from South Africa, where it was found, to England without someone stealing it. So they found a ship with a big safe and they hired numerous detectives to guard the safe and they sent it off to England. Still afraid someone might try to steal it, the diamond they put in the safe was a fake. The real diamond they put in a cardboard box and mailed to England by regular mail. Both diamonds, the fake and the real one made it to England without incident.

It may seem sacrilegious to compare the Son of God to a large stone, no matter how valuable it might be, but the birth of Jesus is somewhat analogous to the Cullinan diamond being shipped in a plain cardboard box. We have just heard the story of Jesus' birth; he is God's Son, greater than anything or anyone in the entire universe; he is consubstantial with the Father (i.e., he is of the same substance as the Father, equal to the Father), true God from true God, through him all things were made (as we profess each week). And here is this great God, greater than any of us can begin to imagine, in a setting, not as fancy as a cardboard box. He is in a cave. Caves served as stables in the area at that time. He is lying in a manger, a feeding trough for animals. His parents were probably middle class at best. Completing the scene, parents and child were surrounded by a few sleepy animals and some shepherds. We should note that in those days, anyone who was a shepherd was looked down upon, not just because they were dirty and smelly (they were always around animals), but because they were considered thieves. Parents were

expected to instruct their children not to be shepherds. It was one of the worse jobs a person could have in life.

What does the simplicity of Jesus' birth indicate? I see three things, the first of which is very practical. If Jesus had been born in a palace with lots of servants and important people around, a setting more appropriate for a person of royalty, there's one person who would have tried to destroy him immediately: the paranoid king, King Herod the Great. Herod was hyper-sensitive about someone trying to usurp his throne and he readily killed anyone who aroused his suspicion. Looking at the simplicity of Jesus' birth in another way, Jesus' simple birth tells us he came for all people, not just the prosperous, the intelligent, the talented, the powerful, but even for the simple people, the poor, the lowly, the lost, the sinners, even you and me. He came to show us he understands our burdens and our suffering. A third perspective on his simple birth ending up in a cave, because there was no room in the inn, may also foreshadow the rejection he would experience later in life, a rejection he would experience even from his own chosen people.

Even though Jesus came quietly and humbly, the stars in the sky and the angels in heaven had to openly rejoice in his unbelievable love for all of us. That is why we're here tonight (today), to remember and to rejoice that Jesus came to us, he came because he loves us, he came because he wants to gather us into his kingdom where there will be no more suffering or hatred or war or pain, ever.

Our being here tonight/today is our way of returning our love, our way of saying thanks, just as every time we come to the Eucharist is a way of saying thanks – for that's what the word Eucharist means, it means: "let us give thanks."

Our being here at this moment gives us a little time to reflect on the full meaning of everything that is happening in our lives at this time of year. I want to leave you with one last story; it's about a mother holding tight on her little three year old boy as she ran from store to store, purchasing all the things she needed this year for Christmas. At one store she suddenly realized that her little boy was no longer holding her hand and she panicked. She retraced her steps and found him with his little nose pressed against a frosty window. He was gazing at a manger scene. When he heard his mother's hysterical voice calling him, he turned and shouted with innocent joy: "Look, mommy! It's Jesus, baby Jesus in the hay." Unmoved by his excitement, she impatiently grabbed for his hand and pulled him away saying: "We don't have time for that."

Thank you for making time to come to Mass today and to thank Jesus for coming to us. May this coming year help us to come closer to him in our daily lives. Amen.