

2nd Sunday of Advent

December 7, 2008

INTRODUCTION - (Isaiah 40, 1-5.9-11; II Peter 3, 8-14; Mark 1, 1-8) Our first reading today begins a section of Isaiah known as the "Book of Consolation." This section of Isaiah is composed of 15 chapters that were addressed to God's people who for 50 years had been refugees and slaves in Babylon (Iraq today). Isaiah announces God is ready to set them free and bring them back home. The route by which the Lord would lead his people home is referred to as "the way of the Lord." Attention must be given to preparing the way. The route would take them through mountains and desert, a passage most likely through the land that is today Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. The images in today's reading are beautiful, especially the image of God leading his people like a shepherd, but the key idea for today is to prepare the way of the Lord, a theme that John the Baptist takes up 500 years later to call the people of his own day to prepare for the Messiah. The liturgy uses these Scriptures to call us to prepare not only for Christmas but also for the day when Christ will call us into his eternal kingdom.

HOMILY: I was impressed with the directness and simplicity of how St. Mark begins his gospel. "This is the gospel (the good news) of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." We say it so glibly and so quickly we might miss the importance of these words, so I want to give them some special emphasis. What could be more basic to our faith than our belief that Jesus is not only Messiah and Savior, but that he is Son of God and everything about him is good news for us. That Jesus is Son of God is one of the things that is unique about our faith and different from all other religions. Moses, Mohammed, Buddha, Confucius, whomever, are all revered as prophets who spoke for God or wise and holy people who taught the path to God, but none are honored as God. Jesus is proclaimed in the gospels as God (not "a" God, but "the" God, the only God, one in being with the Father and the Holy Spirit). So Mark gets right to the essence of our faith as he begins his gospel: "This is the good news (the gospel) of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

Except for two brief references to Mary his mother, St. Mark doesn't spend time telling us anything about Jesus' birth or about his parents. We thank St. Matthew and St. Luke for those beautiful stories which we love to hear again and again about what took place at the time of his birth. In order to stress another concept that is essential for us if we are going to experience the gospel as the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, Mark begins his gospel by telling us about John the Baptist.

It was important for St. Mark to talk about John the Baptist as he began his gospel for two reasons. First of all, many people thought he was the messiah, the savior of God's people. Mark makes it clear in John's own words, "One mightier than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie his sandals." The second reason it is important to bring up John the Baptist as Mark begins his gospel is the message of the Baptist: prepare.

John the Baptist is not talking about preparing our house, or our gifts, or our meals, or our celebrations, which we always do at this time of year and are delightful traditions. He's talking

about preparing our heart. Can we open our hearts to Jesus or to others any more than we already have? Can we say we love God perfectly and completely, our neighbor perfectly and completely? In preparing the way of the Lord, there may not be any mountains or hills of pride that have to come down in our lives. There may not be valleys of spiritual laziness that need to be filled in or rugged land and rough country of serious sin that need to be eliminated to prepare the way for Jesus' coming. But if we think hard, we might discover little spots here and there where we could love God or others more. "Prepare the way of the Lord" was the message of the Baptist and the message of the gospels. We do not enter into God's kingdom by accident or by default. It's like anything else in life, if we want something worthwhile or to accomplish anything worth accomplishing, we need to prepare. Many people assume God's kingdom will be somehow different than everything else in life, that it will take little or no effort on our part to be part of it, that somehow it will come to everyone automatically. The gospels do not tell us that. With St. Mark and with John the Baptist they tell us quite simply and directly: Prepare!

3rd Sunday of Advent

December 14, 2008

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 - not just in the rose colored vestments but especially in our readings. The prophet in today's first reading is speaking to the people of his own day, a people who had been exiles and slaves in Babylon for 50 years. Their exile was over. They had been set free by the king of Persia who had conquered Babylon. They could go home, rebuild their cities and farms and their Temple. The prophet was rejoicing in what God was doing for his people. This passage encourages us to rejoice in what God is doing for us. Incidentally, in St. Luke's gospel, often called the gospel of joy, this is part of the section from the prophet Isaiah that Jesus chose to read in the synagogue to the people of Nazareth to indicate what his ministry would be about. The response, which is almost always from the Book of Psalms, is today taken from the gospel of Luke. It is Mary's hymn of joy, called the Magnificat, which she enthusiastically proclaimed when she visited her cousin Elizabeth after the annunciation.

HOMILY: We heard God's prophet proclaim great joy to the Jews that their exile was over. In the response we heard Mary's expression of joy when she visited her cousin Elizabeth. We heard St. Paul in the second reading tell us to rejoice always. I would like to describe each of these with a little more detail, then I have a brief commercial followed by some concluding remarks.

The prophet in today's first reading announced the Babylonian exile was over. Great news! The people, for the most part, were somewhat glad to be set free, but it wasn't an easy time for them. After 50 years they were pretty well settled in Babylon. They had jobs and homes there. Their homes in Israel had been leveled 50 years earlier and there wasn't much to return to.

Nothing remained of their beloved Temple, which the Babylonians had destroyed, except a hill covered with rocks and weeds. The prophet had a real challenge encouraging God's people to rejoice in their return home. It was only by having faith in what God was doing for them that they could have joy.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, had every reason to be anxious and depressed. Here she was suddenly going to be a mother. Her husband to be, Joseph, was about to break off the engagement. In just a few months, she would suffer disgrace among her family and friends when it became obvious she was going to have a child without being married. In that society she would have no way to support herself financially without a husband. Yet we hear, as she visits her cousin Elizabeth after the annunciation, how she rejoices, not in her misery, but in what God was about to do.

As we know from Paul's writings, his job as a missionary was not an easy one. He tells us in his second letter to the Corinthians that he was beaten numerous times, put in jail, faced angry mobs, had gone without eating or sleeping, faced death, been shipwrecked three times, suffered from cold and pain, and faced dangers from robbers, his own people, even supposed Christians,. Yet he writes to the Thessalonians: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks!" Why? "Because this is the will of God for you." If it is God's will for us that we be joyful, God will certainly help us if we choose to be. Paul is saying we can choose to sit around and feel sorry for ourselves or we can choose to be joyful even in difficult circumstances. We can let self-pity control our lives, or we can choose through faith and with God's help to rejoice. If we can believe in the great things God has done and is about to do for us, we have reason to rejoice.

Let me make a little commercial here. One of the things Paul says is: "give thanks." We certainly do that every time we come to Mass. The very word for the Mass, the Eucharist, means "thanksgiving." There is another way to give thanks today also, through the appeal for the retirement for religious. Most of us were educated by dedicated priests, brothers and sisters who, if they have not died, are now too old to go out and work for a living. There aren't enough younger religious to support them. So they need our help. You can give thanks for what you received years ago by helping them out today. End of commercial.

Even though life is sometimes burdensome and the economy is bad and there are threats all over the world; even though there are a lot of things we can complain about and a lot of things that could be better, we have more reasons to rejoice than any people who ever lived on this planet. We enjoy wonderful physical blessings and our freedom; we have the benefits of modern medicine and conveniences. Yet true joy in our hearts must still go deeper than all the things we have around us for we must rejoice in what God is doing in our life. St. John the Baptist tells us in today's gospel, "there is one among you whom you do not recognize." This is true. By faith we know he is among us, but if we could really recognize him, we would be so full of joy we would be as if we were in heaven. God's plans for us are grandiose, his light and love so wonderful. If we could experience it all we would be mystics, which wouldn't be all bad. But most of us have

to live in faith and hope until God's kingdom is realized in us. So like the people we heard about in today's readings, we rejoice like they did - in faith. Amen.

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 21, 2008

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

Our first reading has to go back to the time when Moses rescued God's people from slavery in Egypt and brought them through the desert to the Promised Land. God made a covenant with his people in the desert. He assured them of his special love and insisted on their total obedience to him. The terms of the covenant (which we usually call the 10 Commandments) were enclosed in a golden box and this box was called the Arc of the Covenant. The top of the Arc had two angels on it and God's invisible throne and presence was envisioned above the angels. This special symbol of God's presence with his people was kept in their midst in a tent for almost 300 years. When King David chose Jerusalem as the center of his kingdom and built his palace there, he decided the Arc should be kept in something more dignified than a tent. He decided to build a house for God, a Temple. That's where today's first reading comes in. God turned down David's proposal but instead said David's son would build the Temple. However, God said he would build a house for David; i.e., God would establish his kingdom so that one of his descendants would always reign as king. For 400 years, the kings of Judah were of the house of David. Unfortunately, many of the kings led God's people away from God, thus leading the nation to lose its faith and its moral strength. They folded easily when the Assyrians and Babylonians attacked them. The people never forgot God's promise to David and they continued to wait for a king from David's line who would lead them once again. In the gospel, we hear the angel Gabriel announce to Mary she would have a son who would inherit "the throne of David his father, and he would rule over the house of Jacob forever and of this kingdom there would be no end."

HOMILY: The scene in today's gospel takes us 600 years later in history after the last king from David's line had ruled God's people. The Romans were in charge at the time of the gospel and the King in Israel, King Herod the Great, was really a puppet of Rome. But God did not forget his promise to David. The angel Gabriel announces to a young girl, soon to be married to a man named Joseph, who is of the house of David, that she will give birth to a son. Her son will inherit "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." More than a king, the angel announces he will be great and will be called Son of the Most High. His birth would take place in an entirely miraculous way, through the power of the Holy Spirit. From the moment Mary said "yes" to the angel, the Son of God took on our human flesh.

This opens up for me a topic that continues to weigh on me, the miracle of conception in general. Mary's conception of Jesus was indeed unique, through the power of the Holy Spirit,

but the conception of each child is something special. A new human being comes into existence at conception. Picture in your imagination, is there any real difference between an infant that is just born and an infant one day from being born? The only difference between the two is where it happens to be living and where it gets its oxygen and nutrition. That's all! Yet the legal systems in so many countries of our world (including our own) make an essential and fundamental distinction between a child just born and one just hours away from being born. They even call them by different names: an infant and a fetus. Legally they say a child just born has all the rights of citizenship, the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness while the other person whose mailing address is still within his or her mother has no rights at all.

A few weeks ago I went to the Freedom Center and I couldn't help but see a parallel between the struggle in our Country over slavery and the struggle over abortion. Slaves were considered to be someone's property, they had no rights, their families could be torn apart, they were not even considered human beings by many people. It took our Country a long time to eliminate slavery and now enlightened countries all over the world recognize slavery as inhuman. No person has the right to treat another as his or her property. Yet, isn't that exactly what's happening with abortion laws. An infant, who is unable to defend itself in any way, is treated as someone's property and can be destroyed at the whim of the owner.

It takes a lot of rationalization to justify that. Yet I recently was in a discussion with a person who should have known better who said, "you don't know whether a fetus is human." I don't know what he thinks it is, a cabbage! If there's life in the mother's womb, there's only one kind of life it can be. I know a doctor who did abortions. He was honest about what he was doing and he didn't whitewash it. He would tell medical students who might be preparing to go into that field that in doing an abortion they are taking human life. I know he suffered a great deal within his own heart over what he did in life.

Why do I bring all this up - because there is a strong possibility that the government will pass the Freedom of Choice Act early next year. This will make abortions all the more available. In the near future we will put something in the bulletin to enable you to contact your senator or representative to express your position of this Act. It's not my role to tell people who to vote for or what candidate to favor. But as a moral leader I have the responsibility to speak about moral issues and abortion is certainly one of the major ones that we cannot ignore. People ask me why do I not speak about it more. I feel the focus of my homily should always be on God's Word in the Scriptures and, if people respond to what God tells us, then most moral problems will be answered. The miracle of Mary's conception in today's gospel inspired me to say something about the miracle and the gift of life itself. It must be honored and respected in all its stages - from conception to natural death. Amen.

Christmas

December 25, 2008

I read the children's book: The Invisible String by Patrice Karst. Because of copyright laws it would not be permissible to reprint the whole story. The theme of the book is a mother explaining to her two small children (who were frightened in the night by lightening) that she is always connected to them by an invisible string. No matter where they went they were connected, and they were connected to one another and to their friends the same way. Love is the invisible string that connects us all and keeps us from ever being lonely. It's a beautiful story.

I went to a class this year (a person has to keep learning even after they graduate from school) and the professor began our class with this story. I thought how perfect for Christmas.

Jesus came to tell us about the invisible string that connects us with God, God's love for us. Because God is a pure spirit God, has no body and God is invisible to our eyes. We can only know him by seeing all the beautiful things God made, and by the holy things God has spoken to us through his prophets, but God wanted to do more to convince us of his love. And so God's own Son became human like us to tell us about God and to tell us about God's love - the invisible connection God has with us.

After he taught us about God's love and showed it to us in everything he did, Jesus returned to his Father in heaven to prepare a place for us where we would be with him forever. But just so we would know he hasn't left us alone, he gave us Communion to help us stay united with him and he sent his Holy Spirit to dwell in our hearts.

That invisible string between us and God, the power of his love for us and the sacraments and the Holy Spirit, and the invisible string that unites us with those we love, this gives us a peace and a joy no one can take from us.

Isn't it great that Jesus was born and aren't you glad to know that we are connected with him and he with us. When we pray we tug on that invisible string and he tugs back, so let us continue to celebrate his birth and thank God for sending him to us to be our friend and our savior. Amen.