

2nd Sunday of Advent - A Cycle
December 8, 2013

INTRODUCTION (Isaiah 11,1-10; Romans 15,4-9; Matthew 3,1-12)

The historical setting for today's first reading goes back 700 years before Christ. It was a time of great distress for Israel. The Assyrians had literally annihilated all of the area north of Jerusalem, an area known as the northern kingdom. It was very likely Jerusalem would be the next victim of the Assyrian army. In spite of all this, we hear in today's reading a message of hope – a promise of great blessings to those who have remained faithful to God. A great leader, filled with the Spirit of God, would usher in these blessings. This leader would come from the royal house of David – that is what Isaiah meant when he identifies this leader as “a shoot that would sprout from the stump of Jesse.” Jesse was the father of King David, as I'm sure you all know, and the kingship in Jerusalem was barely surviving as the word “stump” indicates.

HOMILY: I am going to present my homily in two parts: first I'll say some things about John the Baptist; second I want to say something about his message.

First, a little background about John the Baptist. St. Luke tells us his parents were Elizabeth and Zechariah. John was born to them miraculously when they were old, a sign that John would be a special gift from God. Zechariah was a priest who served at the Jerusalem Temple and Elizabeth was a relative of Mary, Jesus' mother. Luke chose to use the word “relative” rather than the word “cousin,” which gives one the idea that Elizabeth and Mary were more distant relatives. Now we are going to do a little reading between the lines, speculations that scholars have made about John and Jesus. We suspect there was not very much contact between the two of them or between John and Jesus when they were growing up because in the fourth gospel John said of Jesus, “I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’” (*John 1,33*) It is a good guess that after John's parents died, John was raised by and was part of the community of the Essenes, the people responsible for writing the Dead Sea Scrolls. It is likely that John got the idea of baptizing people from the Essenes. It is fair to speculate that John separated from the Essenes because of his belief that the Messiah's coming was imminent, that the kingdom of heaven was “fast approaching;” and the need for reform was urgent. (*The Gospel of Matthew, Anchor Bible, pg 28*) Many scholars have speculated that Jesus participated in John's ministry for a short time before he went off on his own. Now I go back to information we get directly from the gospels. John's ascetical lifestyle is well known. He lived in the desert, dressed like the great prophet Elijah and ate wild honey and locusts (locust refers to the bug, which is high in vitamins and is still eaten today by people in the Middle East. I think I would rather eat broccoli!) The most important thing to remember about John is that he was a great prophet. Jesus said of him: “Amen, I say to you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist...” (*Mt. 11,11*) To conclude what I have to say about John, like most prophets, John was put to death because he offended those in power at the time.

As a prophet, God spoke through John and so the Church chooses today's reading because through them, God is now speaking to us. I think if there is any time in history John's message needs to be heard it is that it needs to be heard by people in today's culture. John's message was to repent, which means to have a change of heart. This means we need to have God first in our lives, not second or third or fourth, but first. When John said "do not say 'We have Abraham for our father,'" John was telling the Jews you can't presume because you are a member of God's chosen people you can do whatever you want without the possibility of any negative consequences. John is telling us, too, that we can't do what we want or make up our own rules just because we carry the name Catholic. It drives me crazy when I see people on the news who engage in outlandish behavior and then say they are Catholic. So what. Does that make their behavior okay? Or the same is true of those who claim "I don't have any religion but I'm a spiritual person," as many do today. Which is their way of saying I can live the way I want, and because I'm "spiritual" it's okay. It's God who makes the rules, not us. John says we, like a tree, must bear good fruit which means we must live a virtuous life and let God's law and God's Spirit guide our lives. It is an important message for Advent. As Christmas draws near, we can have parties and give gifts and send cards and decorate and bake, but as Thomas Merton writes "it's important to remember the deep seriousness of Advent, which should remind us that the King who is to come is more than a charming infant smiling in the straw. The Advent mystery focuses the light of faith upon the very meaning of life, of history, of humanity, of the world and of our own being." (*Seasons of Celebration*)

John's call to put God first is the same message that came from Jesus. One of the ways we do this is to put him first by giving him an hour of our time at the beginning of the week. Where will our lives of virtue lead us? The answer is right there in the first reading - to a new world, a world led by God's own Spirit, a world where justice will rule and where there will be peace. As we wait for that day to come, we must prepare for it now, John said, by living holy lives. Amen.

3rd Sunday of Advent - A Cycle

December 15, 2013

INTRODUCTION: (*Isaiah 35,1-6a.10; James 5,7-10; Matthew 11,2-11*) If you or I could change our world to make it better, what would we do to change it? Today Isaiah describes to God's people (most probably those who were still in exile) what God's plans were to make things better for them. God would start with the land, turning their desert, arid lands into gardens bursting with vegetation and beauty, comparable to the coastal areas where the land was fertile and there was adequate rainfall, such as Lebanon, Carmel (which is today Haifa) and Sharon. Transforming the land was just a beginning. Those who were weak, sick, blind and lame would be freed of their affliction. It would be a return to the Garden of Eden where God's people would be crowned with everlasting joy. What a beautiful picture of salvation Isaiah presents. Matthew tells us

in today's gospel that God's work of creating a new world begins with Jesus. St. James tells us in the second reading that as we hope for a new world, we must be patient and steadfast in our faith.

HOMILY: Christmas is near, the liturgy tells us to rejoice! Christmas is that time of the year when a person sits in front of a dead tree and eats candy out of his/her sock." Victor Borge had this to say about Christmas: "Santa Claus has the right idea. Visit people only once a year." (*The Joyful Noiseletter, Nov./Dec. 2013, pg 2*) Well, we had to have a little humor today – after all, today is Gaudete Sunday. "Gaudete" means rejoice. It is true, the celebration of his birth is just a week and a half away, but the Lord himself is near as we gather together in faith to hear his word and to receive him in the Sacrament. That is always a cause for rejoicing. As we say in the Mass every day, "Lift up your hearts."

It is our faith and hope in God's promises, promises yet to be fully realized, and it is our confidence in his love that are the source of our joy. In the first reading we hear the prophet, this prophet known as deuterio-Isaiah or second Isaiah, a prophet who lived during the time of the Babylonian exile. The prophet promises God would restore his people to their homes and their world itself would be transformed. We know that we, too, are away from our true home now (which is heaven as St. Paul tells us – Philippians 2,20), but when we arrive there our world will be transformed also, transformed so wonderfully that we have no way to fully describe it. We do know we will be really fulfilled and happy – forever!

As James tells us, until that day when God brings us to our heavenly dwelling, we have to wait in patience and faith. That's what John the Baptist was doing as he sat in prison – trying to be patient, and perhaps trying to hold on to his faith. No one knows how to interpret John's psychological state when he sent his disciples to ask Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come?" Was he beginning to develop faith in Jesus or was he beginning to lose what faith he had or was he interested only in introducing his disciples to Jesus? No one can say what he was feeling. My own suspicion is since Jesus proclaimed that he had come to "give release to the captives," (*Lk. 4,18*) John was confused about Jesus. Jesus was doing all these wonderful things that Isaiah talks about: healing the blind, the deaf, the lame, the mute, but here was John, still locked up in prison. Why, if Jesus was the "one who is to come," didn't he rescue John? I think that's what was behind John's question.

The question John asks is one I am sure every one of us has asked at different times throughout our lives. Are you the "one who is to come," the promised one who will save us. On this we come back to our second reading: "Be patient... the coming of the Lord is very close." If I ever find out why bad things happen to good people, I'll write a book, but until then I'll keep believing in Jesus – there's no other answer to life's ups and downs as far as I'm concerned, and that is where I find my joy. Amen.

Fourth Sunday of Advent – A Cycle

December 22, 2013

INTRODUCTION – (*Isaiah 7,10-14; Romans 1,1-7; Matthew 1, 18-24*) Our first reading takes us back 700 years before Christ to the Middle East. It was as complicated a political situation then as it is today. There are four nations and their kings involved in this complicated story I'm going to tell you. Tiglath-pileser III was king over the Assyrians. The Assyrians were the dominant power in the Middle East. They were an especially cruel and powerful nation whose capital was located in what is today northern Iraq. Ahaz was king in Jerusalem, and that's the only name you will need to remember. There were two more kings whose lands were north of Jerusalem. These two kings from the north decided they wanted to go to war against Assyria and they wanted King Ahaz in Jerusalem to join them. Ahaz refused, so the two northern kings were going to attack Jerusalem to replace Ahaz with someone who would go along with their scheme. Ahaz decided to call on Assyria for protection. This is where our first reading comes in - an extremely important passage in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. Isaiah warned Ahaz not to get involved with Assyria for they were too powerful. Isaiah promised, "God would keep the king and Jerusalem safe." The two kings from the north would soon be destroyed. Ahaz did not have enough faith in God. Isaiah tried to offer Ahaz a sign that he should trust God. Ahaz, in a phony display of humility, protested, but Isaiah offered a sign anyway. For Ahaz the sign would be that he would soon have a son to succeed him as king. He had no offspring at this time for he had recently sacrificed his only son to the Canaanite God, Moloch. This future son of King Ahaz would be called by the symbolic name Emmanuel for he would be a sign that God was with his people. God was faithful to his word. Ahaz did have a son who succeeded him and his son turned out to be a good leader. Almost eight centuries later, St. Matthew saw in this promise of Isaiah a greater depth of meaning as we will hear in today's gospel. He saw that Jesus fulfilled this promise perfectly by being born of a virgin and by being a sign to us that God is with us.

HOMILY – Bob forgot to give his wife a gift or bring her flowers on their wedding anniversary. His wife was really angry. He asked how he could make things right with her. She said with Christmas around the corner, she wanted a gift that would go from 0 to 200 in six seconds. So on Christmas he told her the gift was in the garage. She ran down excitedly, opened the garage door and there in the garage was a brand new, brightly shining, chrome plated bathroom scale. Bob hasn't been seen or heard from since.

It seems to be a guy thing to forget anniversaries. But anniversaries are very important. We are preparing to celebrate the anniversary of the birth of Jesus, an anniversary that people have celebrated for about 17 centuries. Both Matthew and Luke describe for us some of the events leading up to the birth of Jesus. Since most of our gospels this year will be from Matthew's gospel, we listen to what Matthew tells us about Jesus' birth. Matthew's account of Jesus' birth and the events that led up to it does not lend itself to beautiful works of art or musical compositions as does Luke's infancy narrative. We can appreciate Matthew because he tells us what was happening with Joseph, while Luke

tells us mostly about Mary. We wish they could have told us more, but these were the traditions they had to work with, so we are grateful for preserving them for us.

Both Matthew and Luke stress the miraculous nature of Jesus' conception and the problems it created for Mary and Joseph. To understand what was happening with Joseph, we have to know that for the Jews, marriage took place in two stages. First there was a formal exchange of consent before witnesses. The second step was at a later time (usually about a year later) when the groom took the bride to his home. Even before they came to live together, legally they were considered married. Problems arose when Mary conceived Jesus before they lived together. Joseph didn't know what to do, at least not until the angel told him, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home." Of course, he obeyed the message of the angel. Until the angel spoke to him, we do not know what Joseph was thinking. I can't imagine that Mary didn't tell him what was happening, but whether Joseph didn't believe what she told him and he thought she had been unfaithful, or whether he did believe her and he felt unworthy to be part of such a holy event, we are not told. Matthew doesn't give us any insight into Joseph's decision to divorce Mary. Matthew's main intent is to tell us of the miraculous nature of Jesus' birth and that Joseph had a necessary part to play as he was "son of David" (the title the angel gave him in his dream). Legally he would be Jesus' father, he would give Jesus his name (which he did) and legally Jesus would belong to the royal house of David. As a member of the royal house of David, Jesus would fulfill the Messianic expectations of God's people and he would fulfill the ancient prophecy of Nathan, the prophet who told David (1000 years earlier) that "God would establish the throne of David's kingdom forever." (II Samuel, 7,13)

Our gospel is interesting in that it confirms the miraculous conception of Jesus and it gives us a little more insight about the events that surrounded Jesus' birth, but in addition our gospel has a message for us today. It shows us how our lives can take a sudden turn. We have our life planned out and we're going along peacefully day by day doing what we had intended and then, without warning, everything is turned upside down: perhaps it is a sudden sickness or death, a financial loss, a new child within the family, a new in-law or whatever. (*thoughts from Biblical Meditations for Advent and the Christmas Season by Carroll Stuhlmueller, pg 70*) We are reminded we are not in charge and we have to fall back on our faith that God loves us and will help us get through whatever situation we are in. Only God saves (which is what the name "Jesus" means: Yahweh saves). Amen.

Christmas

December 25, 2013

Tom was fresh out of ideas as to what to get his mother-in-law for Christmas. So he bought her a large plot in an expensive cemetery. The following Christmas he also couldn't think of anything to get her, so he didn't buy her anything. She complained he

was so thoughtless and was just taking her for granted. He said “what are you complaining about? You still haven’t used the present I gave you last year.” (My apologies to all mother-in-laws for that one, 99% of whom are all wonderful, loving persons).

A first grader told her classmates that Santa lived in China. When her teacher heard that, she asked the little girl why she thinks Santa lives in China. She said all her gifts say “made in China.”

When two little boys came to visit their grandmother and spend an overnight at her home, as they were saying their prayers, one of the two boys started loudly shouting his prayers: “God, please send me a video game and a new bike.” His brother asked why he was shouting, “God isn’t deaf.” The first little boy said “but grandma almost is.”

This is a time of the year when there is new hope, new joy, a new attitude of care and concern for one another. It is a time of the year when many people are overwhelmed with stress and guilt, stress in trying to do too much and guilt in not being able to do it. It is a time of year when, if a person has suffered some sadness or loss in the past, even in spite of the hope this season offers, the sense of sadness seems much more acute. It is, in brief, a very emotional time and hopefully 99% of you are feeling God’s joy and peace.

Every Christmas we hear the same story, how the Son of God took on our human flesh and lived among us, how he revealed the kingdom of God to us, a kingdom of peace and love, a kingdom free from suffering, a kingdom of eternal joy. It is a kingdom that is beyond anything we can imagine or anything in this world that we can compare it with. His coming to live among us has changed the world forever. Even though there are those who do not believe in him or even hate him, they cannot change the fact that our world is different because Jesus was born and over 2 billion people (over ¼ of the world’s population) believe in him and follow him.

Every Christmas we hear the same story, but every year we hear it somewhat differently because in the course of a year we have become different. For better or for worse, we are not exactly the same person we were last year this time. We may have grown stronger or weaker, we may have learned more or forgotten more, we may have made new friends or lost old friends, our health may have improved or declined. I was thinking how my attitudes about Christmas have changed over the years – from a very materialistic kid who wanted to make sure he didn’t get slighted when Christmas gifts were passed around to become, I hope, a more spiritually oriented person who stands in awe before the crib, wondering that God did this for us, grateful for his goodness and looking at the face of the infant and knowing I am looking right into the face of God.

One of the psalm refrains for Christmas says: “today is born our savior, Christ the Lord.” That word “today” keeps running through my mind. Sure Christ was born a little over 2000 years ago, but today he is born for each one of us. As we go through life, he keeps coming to us, he keeps inviting us to get to know him better, he keeps offering us

a sharing in his own divine life, eternal life. Today he comes to each of us to the degree that we can open our hearts to him. Today he comes to us in those we love, in those we forgive, in those who cause us distress, in those we serve and care for. Today he comes to us in prayer, especially in the greatest prayer we have, the Mass, where we listen to his Word and where he offers us himself as our spiritual food and drink.

His birth has changed the world. May he change all of us for the better, making us aware of his presence, his love, his eternal grace and helping us to be faithful to him. Amen.

Deacon Jerry preached on the Feast of the Holy Family and also on January 1, the Solemnity of Mary.