

Sunday Homily for December 5-6, 2009

Second Sunday of Advent, C cycle Sacred Heart, Margaretville/St. Ann's, Andes NY

1st Reading: Baruch 5:1-9 [God is leading Israel in joy, with mercy & justice for company]

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 126 [The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy]

2nd Reading: Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11 [the one who has begun the good work in you will bring it to completion]

Gospel: Luke 3:1-6 [All flesh shall see the salvation of God]

♪ God has done great things for us, filled us with laughter and music.

Come restore our fortune, renew us in your love,
As rivers through the sand, as springs within the desert;
Those who sow in tears shall reap rejoicing. ♪

The words are those of Psalm 126 - today's Responsorial Psalm. This sung piece of Scripture captures the spirit of today's other readings.

This past year has been full of tears and laughter for me and for many. I have been called to do several funerals for friends and family members. My sisters and brother and I have been keeping vigil for our mother, who has been in hospice care near Hudson, NY for three months. She over into the next life this past week. I feel like I am sowing in tears.

This Advent finds our country struggling with a recession and issues with health care. Parishes are grieving in many ways, with mergers and closures and changes. I walked with a merging parish from November through June and grieved with its people when the doors of its worship site were closed. Many can pray with David, the psalmist, "come, restore our fortune, renew us in your love."

The readings for this Sunday of Advent acknowledge the pain of grieving but they also show us how to move through it to joy and peace. They hold out the hope that the pain of grief can sow the seeds of rejoicing.

How is that possible? How can we become a part of that process?

First, we can remember that it is a process - one that is mirrored by the seasons. These dark days *will* get longer right around Christmas. Spring *will* follow winter, even though November is gray and the snow has begun to fly.

The end of the process is proclaimed by John the Baptist, "all flesh shall see the salvation of God." It is the process we call the Paschal Mystery, the life, death and resurrection of Christ, something we celebrate at every Mass.

Second, we can enter into that process by *remembering* God's blessings in our lives. The grace of God has gotten us through pain and grief and trouble before. We remember those times, so we can renew our trust that it can happen again.

There is a wonderful Jewish way of praying that reminds God of the past and asks, or even challenges God to do it again. I often pray that way in times like ours, "*Lord, I want to remind you that you did it before. I need you to do it again! Soon!*"

When I spoke with my sister this past week and told her that I was down, she suggested that I read some old letters. I found one from the husband of a woman who had died in the summer of 2008. I had the privilege of doing her funeral.

He wrote, "*It has been a year since Kaye died and I am still having good days and bad days, but more good days. The one constant is the remembrance of the comfort you provided in talking to Kaye a day or so before her death and the wonderful celebration at her Mass in Woodbourne. As I am sure you know, Kaye had tremendous faith and although she was sad to be leaving us behind she was looking forward to the future.*"

The chance to be a part of that process with Kaye is one of the great things God has done for me, and it give me hope that God will do it again, even with my own mother.

Third, we are sustained in this process, during this time between thanksgiving and Christmas, by the gift of *hope*.

I like the description of hope given by Václav Havel, a poet and past president of the Czech Republic, when he writes of his experience of being pulled out of a sewer where he almost drowned:

"Hope in this deep and powerful sense is not the same as joy when things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously destined for early success, but rather an ability to work for something to succeed. Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It's not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out."

There is another image of hope which I found in a reflection by Fr. Ron Rolheiser. The image is that of a candle flame. He writes:

In South Africa, prior to the abolition of apartheid, people used to light candles and place them in their windows as a sign of hope, a sign that one day this injustice would be overcome. At one point, the authorities began to crack down on this. It became illegal to have a lit candle in your window, as illegal as carrying a gun. The irony of this was not missed by the children. They soon had a joke among themselves: "The government is afraid of candles."

Eventually, as we know, apartheid was overcome. Reflecting on the forces that helped overthrow it, it is fairly obvious that candles, lit religious candles, were more powerful, ultimately, than were firearms. Hope is more powerful than any army.

To light a candle, then, is to say that gentleness, love and justice are ultimately more powerful than threats, torture and guns. To light a candle is to proclaim to the world that our real allegiance is given to something and to someone beyond them, beyond any earthly power.

In retrospect, the government's paranoia about candles was well founded. A lit candle is a powerful statement of hope.

Advent hope is described in the words in the middle of the Our Father, "we wait **in joyful hope** for the coming of our savior Jesus the Christ." If the same Christ is to come into my personal world, and bring his peace to the world of today, we need to trust in him the way Mary did, the way the prophets of the Old and New Testament trusted.

Mary received the Word of God into her body as a gift. She was not in control, but she waited in joyful hope. She put the one she was waiting for above her security, her reputation, her very life.

Baruch says that God is leading us, the new Israel, with his mercy and justice for company. He calls Jerusalem, *the peace of justice*.

St. Paul shows us how to live in hope. He writes his most joy-filled letter, the one we read from today, while he is himself in prison.

John had to wait, but his waiting was really active. He was preparing the way for the Lord. He was full of hope, trusting that the one who began the good work in him would bring it to completion, as St. Paul writes in today's letter to the Philippians. He put his hope into action by calling all who heard him to repent of injustice and oppression.

I would like to leave you with a prayer which St. Paul wrote, and which is a part of today's second reading:

My prayer is that your love may more and more abound, both in understanding and wealth of experience, so that with a clear conscience and blameless conduct you may learn to value the things that really matter, up to the very day of Christ. It is my wish that you may be found rich in the harvest of justice which Jesus Christ has ripened in you, to the glory and praise of God.