

Fourth Sunday of Advent
Year B - 20/12/2020

2 Samuel 7:1-11,16
Psalm: Magnificat
Romans 16:25-27
Luke 1:26-38

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

During the week I shared on the Parish Facebook page a poem by the poet, Ruth Burgess - its theme was journey:

*Bright star-maker God,
travel with us
through Advent;
shine into our
dark corners,
lead us into
ways of justice,
warm us
with joy and wonder.
Bring us
to new birth.*

Advent is indeed all about journey - the internal journey that we make in preparation for Christ's coming. But it is not only we who journey. Our readings and texts also travel during Advent. Remember, for example, the tone and tenor of the Gospel reading for the first Sunday in Advent. Jesus says "But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken."

True, we may have lit the candle of hope on that first Sunday in Advent, but the mood seemed anything but hopeful! If the readings of that day seemed dark, the reverse seems to be the case today, as we move inexorably towards our climax of joy in just 5 short days.

The deep sense of apprehension and despair voiced by texts for the First Sunday of Advent has given way over the intervening weeks to a mood of great joy and expectation. The people of God now understand that God is about to do a new and marvelous thing. The saving power of Israel's Redeemer, proclaimed by prophet and priest alike, is now about to break forth in dimensions that confound normal human understanding and that point beyond themselves to a new era in God's relationship with all creation.

The Old Testament reading from second Samuel confirms Yahweh's choice of the family of David as the extraordinary vehicle for divine salvation. The Davidic kingship has been established in perpetuity, in that David's throne "shall be made sure forever" (v. 16).

Yet it is clear that no political power now remains with Israel's greatest dynasty of rulers, and so the entire promise is seen to be a mockery unless—and it is a large "unless"—God now plans to do a new and unparalleled thing in the life of humankind.

That is of course precisely what God has in mind. The Gospel reading brings the sequence of readings full circle and provides a narrative that ties all the other passages together. Gabriel announces to Mary that she is to bear the "Son of God". Overwhelmed by both the holiness and the enormity of the moment, Mary nonetheless consents to the will of God's messenger: "Let it be with me according to your word"

I think that it is vital that we notice one thing: even before Mary says "yes," she is blessed. Why does this matter? Because I think it captures not only the important role Mary plays in the Gospel story but also reveals a central dynamic of the Christian life.

First, to Mary. She is regularly hailed as a model of faith for her acceptance of the role God invites her to play as the mother of Jesus. And for good reason. Throughout Luke's Gospel, the willingness to trust the promises of God is the mark of discipleship. And so Elizabeth believes that in her old age she will nevertheless bear John, and the disciples believe they will fish for people, and the repentant thief believes Jesus is innocent and asks his blessing and so on. Similarly, Mary also believes God's promises.

But what is it, exactly, that Mary believes? Yes, she believes Gabriel's announcement that she will bear Jesus. But before that, she believes that God noticed her, that God favors her, that God has blessed her and has great plans for her.

And this, I think, leads us to a central dynamic not only in the Gospel but also the Christian life itself: the first, and in some ways the most important, thing we are called to believe is that God similarly notices, favors, and blesses us. And once we believe that, we can do incredible things.

It's a really hard thing for us to grasp sometimes - we are quick to dismiss such an occurrence. "Oh, me??" "I don't think God blesses *me!* Him perhaps, or her, maybe - but surely not me!

Blessing, you see, is a powerful thing. And, sadly, a rare thing. We live in a world that seems geared toward rewards and punishments. Whether at work or school or even home, we have been conditioned to expect people to give us only what we deserve.

But blessing operates on a different logic. Blessing is never deserved, but always a gift. Blessings intrudes into, interrupts, and ultimately disrupts our quid pro quo world to announce that someone sees us as worthy and special apart from anything we've done.

Maybe that's another reason why we are so quick to discount the possibility of God's blessing upon us - because it can indeed disrupt and intrude into our carefully planned lives. Is there any greater evidence of that than the appearance of an angel to a 14 year old girl with the truly shocking news that she is to bear the son of God? Personally, I can't think of anything more disruptive than that!

Work, school, our home life - these can seem like such mundane things and hardly worth God's attention. And yet in this story we hear about God noticing and blessing someone who by all accounts is a nobody in the ancient world. And when this nobody young girl believes God's blessing and accepts God's favor, the world begins to turn.

This is why I think this passage is so important, not because it lifts up Mary as the exception, but rather because it identifies her as an example of what can happen when you believe that God notices, favors, and blesses you: if you believe that, you may just change the world!

This is the reason behind the hopefulness of this Advent season - why our mood lightens and becomes one of anticipation, as we consider the hope, peace, joy and love of this season.

The vigorous hope of Jews and Christians in God's future for human history through a human agent is established in the oracle of second Samuel. The hope stays on in Jewish (and Christian) hearts. In Advent, Christians dare to claim that a Jewish peasant girl was blessed and favoured, and that this remembered and coming Jesus carries the promise of David for newness and well-being

Advent is for hoping; Christmas is for receiving God's unambiguous, confident Yes!
All rejoice, for the new King is soon to appear!

Amen