

DECEMBER 3 /4, 2016

Second Sunday of Advent

1. We must be good stewards of God's gifts to us, receiving them gratefully and cultivating them with care, lest we be the ones about whom John the Baptist speaks today, cautioning us, "Every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."
2. In today's Gospel reading, John the Baptist warns his listeners: "Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!" The Church's Advent herald is a call to repentance. The season urges us to a conversion of heart. Christian stewards heed this call daily, and take the need for conversion in their lives seriously. As a family of faith, do we hear this call to conversion amidst the massive holiday spending? The increase in credit card debt? The subsidizing of those mainstream corporations that traffic in pornography? The rage on the roadways? Are there patterns in our lives that need to be converted?
3. ***"A voice of one crying out in the desert, 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.'"*** (Matthew 3:1-12) When Matthew quotes the passage above from the prophet Isaiah to describe John the Baptist, he was well aware that the land to the east of the River Jordan where John lived a simple life, preached a powerful message, and hid from Jewish leaders and Roman conquerors was quite barren and harsh. It is an area of inert minerals long before exposed by earthquake and eroded by the waters that became the Jordan River as it empties into the Dead Sea. John sacrificed much, risked all, and was eventually martyred for being "A voice crying out in the desert . . ." He called people to acknowledge their sins, repent and be baptized with water. Despite all that he knew, and had the humility to proclaim, "the one who is coming after me is mightier than I." John came before Jesus but he was one of his greatest imitators. We have the example of John, Mary, the Apostles, and two thousand years of people who are examples of faithful imitators of Jesus. Are we learning from them? Advent is a time to grow in our efforts to be like Jesus.

OR ***"He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in his hand."***

(Matthew 3:1-12) To properly prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus in a cave in the hills of Bethlehem more than two thousand years ago it is helpful to recall our Baptism. We received the Holy Spirit and were presented with a candle that represented the Light of Christ that we were charged to "keep burning brightly!" With our Baptism came the responsibility to know Christ so we can imitate Christ and be Christ to all we encounter. In a season when so many gifts are being bought, wrapped and given, we should recall that the greatest gift we can give to others at Christmas, or any other time of the year, is not the latest electronic device or the newest fashion in clothes. The greatest gift we can give is ourselves: all that we are, all that God has given to us, and all that we will ever become. Glitzy games will soon be outdated and fancy jeans will go out of style, but the gift of self will last forever for both the person who receives the gift and the giver of the gift.

DECEMBER 10/11, 2016

Third Sunday of Advent

1. Each of us has his or her own role to play in the coming of the Kingdom of God. John the Baptist was called to be the herald of the Messiah, preparing the way of the Lord. To what is the Lord calling me?
2. From the loneliness of his prison cell, John the Baptist asks of Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" The weeks before Christmas offer much to be joyous about, celebrating with family and friends, the glitter of seasonal decorations, the excitement of gift giving and receiving. But in our midst there are the lonely and the neglected, the poor, the hospitalized, the wayward, the shut-ins. There are those seemingly without hope. To whom should they look? Discipleship in the Lord includes being good stewards of others. Are there those in our family, our neighborhood, our community who we can reach out to this season to show them a sign of Christ's presence in our midst?
3. ***"What did you go out into the desert to see?" (Matthew 11:2-11)*** After his arrest John the Baptist sent his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another? John knew his time to lead them was coming to an end. Jesus simply tells them to report what they saw and heard. He then proclaims the greatness of John, but assures those who acknowledge their sin and repent, who understand and have the faith to imitate what Jesus said and did, will enter the Kingdom of God and be greater than John during his sojourn on earth. So it will be for all of us who do our best to learn about Jesus, to be like Jesus, to love like Jesus, and to risk all like Jesus by loving God and our neighbor as ourselves. That is certainly something to desire. It is something to prepare for. It is something to strive for. We can do that by reading the nativity stories in Matthew and Luke before we hear them proclaimed during the Christmas Masses. Reflect on the meaning of God made Man, born in a cave, who is the Prince of Peace. Reflect on how we can be more like Him.

OR ***"What did you go out into the desert to see? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet." (Matthew 11:2-11)*** John the Baptist challenged people to identify and acknowledge the error and evil in their lives. He baptized them with water as a sign of their decision to repent - to turn away from sin and live a new way. While in prison he sent his followers to Jesus to ask if he was the one they were expecting. Jesus sent back a simple message, "Go tell him what you see." Jesus then says that no man born of woman is greater than John, but not because of how he dressed or where he lived. No, John was great because he knew the truth, he lived the truth, and he challenged others, and us, to live the truth. John was a prophet, and more. The role of a prophet is to identify the silly, stupid, senseless, and sinful things in our world and to call for change. In doing that, John prepared the way for Jesus. At our Baptism, we were anointed "priest, prophet, and king." Like John, we must prepare the way for Jesus, for ourselves, and for others.

DECEMBER 17/18, 2016

Fourth Sunday of Advent

1. When he discovered that Mary was with child, Joseph resolved to end their engagement with as little disgrace as possible. But obedient to the voice of God, he changed those plans and became instead the protector of the child Jesus and His mother, Mary. God grant that I may be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit!
2. In today's Gospel we hear of the coming of Emmanuel, which means "God is with us." We celebrate three Advents: the birth of Christ, his Second Coming, and his presence in the world today. Our daily lives are attended by God's presence. Indeed, "God is with us." The Good News of Christ's Incarnation is that we are the sign, "sacrament" of Christ's presence in the world. People are supposed to see us, see how we love one another, see how we treat the stranger among us, give comfort to the poor and afflicted, share the Good News with joy. They see how good stewards are the light of Christ. And there can be no possible response except to say: "God is here!"
3. ***"Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man, yet unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly." (Matthew 1:18-24)*** St. Joseph is rightly revered for his contribution to our eternal salvation. He must have been devastated by the news that Mary, his betrothed wife, was pregnant, but not with his child. He knew Mary would not only be shamed, but in a small village like Nazareth, everyone would have known that Joseph was not the father and she was at risk of being stoned to death. Joseph trusted God and believed his assurance, through an angel, that Mary had not been unfaithful. He took her into his home and was a loving and caring husband of Mary and father to Jesus. Like Joseph, we face difficult situations and challenges in life that hurt us physically, emotionally, and spiritually. How we deal with them depends largely on how well we know Jesus by constant regard and reflection of the truth revealed to us by God in Scripture. Have you prepared your gift for Jesus to celebrate his birthday? If not, give him the gift of reading one of the four Gospels, such as Matthew or Luke. And remember, Jesus is the "Reason for the Season."

OR ***"When Joseph awoke he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and he took his wife (Mary) into his home." (Matthew 1:18-24)*** What if Joseph, in the legitimate exercise of his free will, had said, "No, I will not take Mary into my house as my wife. Let her be stoned to death according to the law." Mary, despite the deadly consequences that could await her, had already freely said "Yes!" and the Word was Incarnate in her womb. Happily for us all, Joseph received Mary into his home and lovingly cared for her and for the child that he knew was not his own. They were a family made holy by mutual love and courage and sacrifice. They gave themselves to one another, and to us, in total love, without counting the cost or being deterred by the consequences. Imagine a world in which every family is characterized by such love, courage, and sacrifice; by "making holy what we do" regardless of cost or consequences – every family a holy family. Oh, what a Christmas that would be!

DECEMBER 24/25, 2016

The Nativity of the Lord

1. For unto us is born this day a Savior! In response to so great a love, only the gift of my whole self will do. You have given us Yourself, dear Lord; in love and thanksgiving, I commit myself afresh to You.
2. Amidst the beautiful Christmas readings at today's Masses is a reading from Saint Paul that reminds his protégé, Titus, that God has given us a gift in the person of Jesus Christ. This gift represents God's active presence in our lives and in our world. This gift redeems us from evil and death. This gift purifies us as God's people. This is a gift that also comes with an expectation: that we receive it with thanksgiving, allow it to transform us into Christ's image; and from it, learn how to live a life "eager to do what is good." Take time the next few days to reflect on the marvelous gift we celebrate at Christmas, and how we might become better stewards of this gift.

DEC. 31/JANUARY 1, 2017 Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God

1. Joseph's obedience to God was not a one-time thing. His attention to the angel's warning kept Jesus from being murdered by Herod and led to the fulfillment of the prophecy that the Messiah would be a Nazorean. Fidelity to God's will assures the best use of my talents, too!
2. In today's Gospel we are reminded of the poverty of Mary. Her tiny, vulnerable baby is born in a manger. Mary possessed nothing, had no social status, no power, no privileges. But in her hidden lowliness, God's grace worked to offer us Christ, our savior. By our baptism, we too bear the presence of the risen Lord. How might we become more "poor in spirit" in order to better reveal the active presence of Christ in our daily lives?