

Fourth Sunday of Advent: 12/20/15 by: Shelly Farabaugh, OSB

As I ponder the readings for this 4th and last Sunday of Advent, I see instructions and education for seekers of God and the holy child. These are delightful readings for “little people;” those who consider themselves to be of little significance in a very complex world. The prophet Micah starts out with a word to Bethlehem who he calls- too small to be among the clans of Judah- from you shall come the one who is to be the ruler of Israel. All of the Scripture for the 4th Sunday of Advent gives simple clear instructions. In the response to the first reading, the refrain pleads: “make us turn to you and let us see your face.” In the second reading the letter to the Hebrews repeats that our job is to do God’s will. All the sacrifices and offerings are not as important as “I come to do your will.” Then we have the Gospel story of Mary visiting Elizabeth in the hill country. In the midst of all the Spirit filled activity there are these two pregnant women, one old and married, one young and unmarried. Of all the lines of this story, the simple and most significant one is last: “you believed that what God said to you would be fulfilled.” Your belief that God can do this will be your greatest attribute. All of these readings provide simple instruction to us about our preparation for the savior.

During this past week I learned two interesting things about the poet Emily Dickenson. Her usual clothing was a simple, plain white dress. The white garment for her was not a symbol for purity or innocence or virtue. But, white signified for her the white heat of the fire of passion, a passion of life and involvement in life. One of her poetic lines is that “I dwell in possibility.” This might mean, she was saying she lives in opportunity, options, or risk. Life is about an unknown journey which must be accompanied with passion and zeal in the ordinary circumstances. Living in the possibility says a lot to me about our Benedictine journey and life. Who knows what tomorrow brings? Can we live in today and believe what is spoken to us?

All the Scripture readings for the Fourth Sunday of Advent challenge us to live in the possibility—maybe even the unknown-in a very ordinary way. We may not have to have spectacular or noteworthy gifts. We do need to do our best and to do our best with passion and zeal. Whether that means we allow ourselves to be inconvenienced by others needs— “make us turn to you and see your face.” When our plans are turned upside down by a person or circumstance, can we respond in the present moment to an inspiration to assist someone or do something we had not planned?

In Christ’s time there were many people for whom that small babe did not fit their expectation. The vulnerable child was not the conquering king that many were expecting. In living in the possibility of what our life and God’s will calls us to be, we must let go of our expectation of God, of others and of ourselves. We need to be careful not to let these expectations “harden our hearts,” as the psalm warns.

I often hear this from people around my work who have had many years of experience with people who “use others or the system,” with people who are not truthful, with people who are homeless once again after a short episode of being housed, because they did not pay their bills. It would be easy for me to harden my heart and to readily judge others. Often I feel like my heart can be broken when life leads to an outcome that is not what I expected. And then it struck me that this is not unlike God as God looks on the behavior of the human race. So much love and zeal poured out on God’s creation only to be cast aside by our human choices.

The Psalmist tells me “harden not your heart.” Do not judge. Your heart must be fleshy and able to be broken for the others. The Gospel today says: “blessed are you who believe what is spoken to you by the Lord.” The fruit of our lives is not to see the results. We can only plant the seed and be willing to live in the possibility that our efforts will be part of doing God’s will. Can my life seek to be the white hot passion that tries to do God’s will, believe what I am told and not get lost in feeling insignificant? No matter how small, no matter how little we consider our efforts, God’s will and possibility can turn everything we do into praise. If our hearts can still be broken we are alive; each day our job is not to judge but to ask who am I?

I happened on to a quote from Henri Nouwen that says a lot to me as we conclude the Advent season:

God came to us because he wanted to join us on the road, to listen to our story, and to help us realize that we are not walking in circles but moving towards the house of peace and joy. This is the great mystery of Christmas that continues to give us comfort and consolation: we are not alone on our journey. The God of love who gave us life sent his only Son to be with us at all times and in all places, so that we never have to feel lost in our struggles but always can trust that he walks with us.

The challenge is to let God be who he wants to be. A part of us clings to our aloneness and does not allow God to touch us where we are most in pain. Often we hide from him precisely those places in ourselves where we feel guilty, ashamed, confused, and lost. Thus we do not give God a chance to be with us where we feel most alone. Christmas is the renewed invitation not to be afraid and to let him - whose love is greater than our own hearts and minds can comprehend— be our companion."

Third Sunday of Advent: 12/13/15

The poets and prophets, lay a great challenge before us saying: Shout for joy, Benedictine Sisters of Pittsburgh at Bakerstown. Be glad and exult with all your heart for the Lord has removed judgment from you.

These poets and prophets remind us that as far as the east is from the west, so far has the Lord removed sin and wrongdoing from us. We shine brightly like stars as we joyfully sing the Lord's praise right here in this choir, in this eventide, in this chapel. Rejoice! All right, I will say it again, "Rejoice for the Lord is in our midst." And what is more, our God is rejoicing over each of us, renewing us in love and singing love songs because of us. We are called and challenged to be a people of enduring, strong joy.

And yes, as a reality check, I do know what is going on in our world and in our global family. Poverty, injustice, terroristic activity, sickness and loneliness, fear and alienation touch us all. Still, to live with a joyful heart is a choice to which we are daily called.

I want to share a story with you. About this time of year when I was in the 7th grade my mother was bedridden for a while. She had had a series of serious episodes with her heart and in those days, before heart surgery, they hoped to mend her heart by strapping her to a board in her bed. She, this young wife and mother was greatly immobilized, in pain and I would image, very much afraid though she did not express that. During this time, my responsibility was to come home from school at noon, fix lunch for my sister, my mother and myself and then feed my mother. (There was a nurse in the neighborhood who came to help her with other personal needs but that is not the point here.) On one particularly gloomy day when things were not going well for me and I was in a snippy mood, I carried my mother's tray into her room and sat down beside her. Usually, we would talk pleasantly but not this day. I was sulking and my mother, aware of my mood, spoke lightly and tried telling me a funny story. But I would not have it: I stopped her abruptly asking, "And what good reason do you have for being so happy?" She fell silent. I was miserable and ashamed. After a while, she took my hand, looked at me and asked, "Don't you know that joy is God's gift to us. All we have to do is ask and be open to it?" I didn't know what to say. I shrugged my shoulders, kissed her and left.

It was a moment, too precious, too beautiful and too painful to handle or repeat to anyone. So I hid it away in some deep part of my heart. During instructions, when I was a novice, Sister Pauline read from Dom Columba Marmion, "Joy is the echo of God's life in the soul." Suddenly, as if carried away by a flood, I was back in my mother's room with the soft blue light that my dad had installed for her filling the room so softly. The realization trembled within me. O my goodness, she knew, she knew in the midst of loneliness, pain and fear that joy is God's gift to us. Joy is the echo of God's life in the soul every day not just on special days or when things are going right. It can be with us even in pain because it comes from longing and openness. At that moment in my life, I realized that joy is not just a serendipitous emotion, it is an essential element of the spiritual life that comes from discipline and nurturance.

In Galatians 5:22, Paul assures us, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Notice that the fruit of the Spirit is singular, yet multi-faceted. To have one is to have all, for these are the essential qualities of living within the reign of God. Joy like the others is honed and strengthened by pursuing it, embracing it and living it. All goodness and beauty require self-control and discipline. I think of the basket makers at the Center quietly, firmly

twisting the reed over and over again until the fruit, a lovely finished basket, rests in their hands. I think of the pruning and toil that is necessary for a bunch of perfect grapes to grace the table with beauty. I think of the long, lonely hours in a research lab perfecting a life saving medicine.—self control—discipline—joy.

To nurture our inner gift of joy, we need:

To live in the present moment with acceptance and trust

To lay aside anxiety and live with thankful hearts

To forgive others and accept forgiveness

To make peace with ourselves, the stranger and the enemy

To welcome all into our global family

Then the Lion will lay down with the lamb and child will play safely with the adder. Then the joy of the Lord will be our strength. Then Iraq and Syria will laugh together and US will open its heart to refugees. Then the peace and the joy of God that surpasses all understanding will hold us together in Christ Jesus.

Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say it, rejoice for the Lord is near—indeed the Lord is in our midst. Not only do we rejoice, the Lord will rejoice with us and over us as he renews us in love. Do you remember the little card that Sister Charlotte kept in her walker basket? It said, “Be glad, the Lord sings love songs because of you.”

So at this Gaudete time, we find delight in the nearness of God. And each day we go forward knowing that “Joy is the echo of God’s life in the soul.” Rejoice.

Second Sunday of Advent: 12/6/15

As I read the Scripture this day, especially the words of the prophet Baruch, as well as the Gospel message of St. Luke, I get a strong sense of the universal character of the message of Jesus, a calling for all of us as a Global Church, as a worldwide Christian community.

The prophet proclaims that God will show all the earth the divine splendor, that all peoples will rejoice in the peace of justice and the glory of God’s worship. The prophet encourages us to gather everyone from the east and from the west, to summon peoples from every nation,

because everyone, without exception, is called to rejoice and proclaim that we are ALL remembered by God.

Likewise Luke, as he sets the stage for Jesus' public ministry, shouts the call to all people, from every corner of the known world, including the Greeks and the Israelites, the Persians and the Medes, yes, ALL PEOPLES will incline their ears to hear the voice of the One Crying in the desert. John the Baptist, the proclaimer of the coming of the Lord, gives voice to each one of us as we try to prepare and to welcome the Savior.

As I read this Scripture, I find myself impelled to translate these words to our own times. These are days when we witness worldwide tragedies like the ones in Paris, or in Colorado Springs, or even most recently in San Bernardino. These are indeed, tragedies that cannot be overlooked or minimized, and that must bear consequences for the perpetrators. However, sadly today we see so many of our leaders addressing the crises by demanding divisions, separations, closing off access and shutting doors to others seeking safety, dignity and opportunity. All in the name of providing greater safety for ourselves. Even though the specific words are not spoken, the implication is that anyone who is different from us in some respect, color, religion, national origin can be very dangerous and should be barred from entering our private space. We hear the demands to close our borders to immigrants, to curtail access for refugees, to turn our backs on anyone who might be from a region experiencing violence. In short, we, according to the claims of many leaders should close ourselves up in a little box in order to keep ourselves safe and free from all dangers. How contrary is this to the scripture message we receive these days.

Then I remember Mary – who will walk prominently with us this week as we celebrate her Feast. We recall her response to threats and dangers. We know that she walked with Joseph to Bethlehem, despite the serious dangers lurking in the Hill Country. We will celebrate her generous welcoming of all who came to see her child even when she must have been exhausted and even frightened in a strange land. She made no distinction between the poor and downtrodden, the hardworking shepherds, the strangers from afar—these unknown people who brought gifts who certainly could be a threat to any child in that day.

How could Mary – and, likewise, how can we, embrace this open, hospitable spirit that reverences each person and is willing to take a risk because they, too, are remembered by God. The secret is FAITH. Mary lived with Faith. She believed in the goodness of God as well as the goodness of people. She lived on the edge with the stranger. She accepted the call to walk forth, to step out into the unknown, believing that God was with her and guiding her.

We have that same call – to respond with the same openness and respect because somehow, somehow, WE BELIEVE , that is the how Jesus is able to come into OUR midst.

First Sunday of Advent: 11/29/15

“A star, a star, shining in the night, it will bring us goodness and light; it will bring us goodness and light.”

We have begun the quiet season of Advent...How was your first day? Was it filled with “goodness and light?”

When I was in grade school I remember one evening when my mother and dad took my sisters and me to view a live Nativity. Shepherds and lambs stood outside the makeshift stable, a donkey was tethered nearby, and other farm animals were milling about. Today I wonder where those North Side Pittsburgh folks got the animals...we did not live in a farming area. But there they were, the characters and the animals of the Christmas story, all alive, all in appropriate costume; the cute little baby bundled in swaddling clothes...everything was so real...except the angel...and the star.

Above the stable was a huge star, illuminated, I suppose, by an electric light, shining and bright. And I guess it was because it would be hard to attach a human angel to the front of the stable that the creators of the scene impaled an angel above the stable and there it was with a spotlight shining on its golden wings...Then another spotlight shining on the Infant, making the straw look like a bed of stringed gold...

There they were...the star, the angel and the infant shining so bright...so bright in fact, that the memory lingers prominently in my memory...and comes back each time I see an advertisement for a “Living Nativity!”

What about our light?

What is the light shining in our hearts? Is it the psalms we read each day, so regular, so ordinary that we sometimes miss their brightness? Is it the gleam in the eye of the person sitting across the table at dinner? Is the light shining in our hearts in need of refreshing? Are others able to see our light?

The readings for the first Sunday of Advent seem to put us in “practice mode” for this momentous event...“the days are coming,” says Jeremiah, “when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel.” “Stand erect” and “raise your heads,” Luke reminds us, “because your redemption is at hand.” “Strengthen your hearts and be blameless in holiness,” exhorts Paul.

Strong words of motivation are encouraging us to prepare to receive the light as well as to be the light!

Perhaps two ways of considering light can give us pause for thought during this beautiful Advent season...and those considerations could be, “How do we receive the light?” and “How do we disperse the light?”

The Nativity scene needed artificial light to illumine what was not “alive”...the impaled angel, the hung star and the straw in the manger...Where do we need light in our own lives? How does the tiny flicker on the candle of the Advent wreath light up our spirit...and our spiritual lives? The ordinariness of the daily liturgy of the hours and the Eucharist are lit with the special antiphons and readings as we move toward the glorious celebration of the Word becoming flesh. Can our attention to the special simplicity of this season provide us with light to enhance some of the dark corners and shadows of our lives?

Scripture scholar Carroll Stulmueller notes that when a light is turned on in a room it does not change anything in the room but rather illumines what is already there.

The light that we receive during this season of Advent can bring light to the dark places we find within ourselves. We must allow the light in! Our own light can do the same! We can bring light to others...those sitting next to us, those we meet in the course of our days, those we touch in our ministries, and so many more.

The diocese of Pittsburgh is advertising the sacrament of reconciliation next week in its parishes with the theme, “The Light Is on for You.”

May each of us find the light and be the light for all we encounter in this beautiful season. Happy Advent!

-Karen Brink, OSB