

**Advent 2: RL B: St. Francis, and St. Stephen's, St. Augustine's**

**December 7, 2008**

**In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit:**

Today is the 2<sup>nd</sup> *Sunday of Advent*. I've said it before and I will say it again: *Advent* is my favorite season of the Church's liturgical year, which by the way begins anew with Advent, so Happy New Year! I truly believe that if everyone had a better understanding of *Advent* that we would avoid much of the commercialism and the rushing to speed through the Christmas Season.

Notice, I say "Christmas Season" not "Christmas Day"—for Christmas Day is only the first of twelve days, a season for celebration and remembering. This is not a time devoted to taking down the Christmas tree and putting up the decorations for another year. But rather this season, these twelve days are a time to contemplate all the wonderful themes and events that are summarized in the realization that Christ is not only born in

Bethlehem, but that Love is born into the world and salvation is ours.

You may recall that last year I devoted my first Advent sermon to a consideration of what may be the most prominent symbol of Advent: the Advent Wreath. We all know, and perhaps love – like I do, this symbol of Advent. The circular wreath reminds us that God has no beginning and no end: He is *the Alpha and the Omega*. The greenery reminds us of God's everlasting love, and the four candles, one for each Sunday in Advent, reminds us that we are watching and preparing for our King. On the Fourth Sunday of Advent, when all four candles burn brightly, we are reminded of the way that Jesus changed darkness into the light of joy and love.

Over the years, we have added additional meanings to the Advent wreath and traditionally we have named each of

the candles. For the most part, but not always, the naming of these candles parallel either the Collect for the Sunday or the theme of the appointed lessons for each Sunday in Advent.

Perhaps the most common tradition is to name the candles in this way: The First Week in Advent: the Prophecy Candle; The Second Week of Advent: The Bethlehem Candle; The Third Week: The Angel's Candle; and the Fourth Week: The Shepherds' Candle. Another tradition is to name them the Promise Candle, the Prophecy Candle, the Candle of John the Baptizer: the Forerunner, and the Bethlehem Candle. An even simpler tradition is to name them the Peace, Hope, Joy and Love candles.

Since we have begun a new liturgical year, we move into Lectionary B. As we consider the Gospel lessons for this Advent in the B Schedule, we could very well name the

candles in this way: The First Sunday of Advent is the Promise of the Second Coming, as reflected in the Gospel Lesson from St. Mark. The Second Sunday of Advent would be the Promise of the Coming Messiah as reflected in today's Gospel. The Third Sunday of Advent the Promise by the forerunner, John the Baptizer. And the Fourth Sunday of Advent would be The Promise to The Virgin Mary. It seems obvious then that this Advent has an over-all theme of Promise.

This past week as I contemplated what to share in this sermon, so many possibilities came to mind. I was reminded of Frank's suggestion from last Sunday's sermon that "we enter this Season of Advent with the enthusiasm of the first century Christians." 'He encouraged us to approach each day and each experience with hope and joy

and the spirit of excitement.’ Certainly, this is a theme that we could continue to develop today.

I also was reminded of the theme of this year’s Advent Study Book: *Reflections of Messiah* in which we will consider “the radical mission of Christ.” This is certainly another important concept which we could develop even recognizing that it might be a bit threatening and even frightening.

St. Stephen’s has chosen for their Advent study a book of daily devotions by Robert C. Hereth: *Good News! Great Joy!* Here again another topic for today’s sermon was suggested. Let me share a short paragraph: Hereth suggests that in writing about the holiday bustle: “The image of a kaleidoscope comes to mind with its jumble of different-shaped, varicolored glass chips, constantly changing, yet

always coming together in a meaningful pattern. Likewise, we Christians, though pulled in many directions by the holiday clutter, have the astounding promise of Advent to hold it all together: the Lord is coming! What good news and great joy is on the way for us to celebrate this season!”

It would certainly be well worth our time to investigate the several possibilities found here in just this one paragraph. **So** -- confronted with so many rich possibilities, I did what I often do. I went to my dog-eared file entitled *Sermon Ideas* and there I found something that really grabbed my attention. It was a reflection on Advent by then Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold written in 2002 and entitled *The Deep Yearning of the Advent Season*. I would like to share his words with you. “Advent is a season of powerlessness in which we are invited to set

aside the various ways we seek to reassure ourselves that we are in control of our lives and are, therefore, invulnerable to all the uncertainties that constitute life as it actually is lived.

Advent is a season in which we get in touch with the deep yearning, the heartache, the soul hunger that emerges when we are stripped of our defenses and obliged to admit that the permanencies upon which we had erected our security are shifting sand rather than rock. Unless one confronts the deep yearning within, the Christmas feast is null and void, because the answers it provide are not fitted to the story book nostalgia that characterizes so much of the season and creates expectations of a “perfect Christmas” that are seldom realized.

The plaintive cry of “O come, O come Emmanuel” and the solemn melody that accompanies it bear witness to that deep yearning that spans the centuries of battle murder and sudden death. And the cry, “bind in one the hearts of all man-kind; bid thou our sad divisions cease, and be thyself our King of Peace,” is that much more urgent and reflective of our own inner reality.

Had Mary been defended against the unexpected, the unsettling and un-known, she never would have been able to say, “Yes” to Gabriel’s shattering announcement that she would become the vehicle of God’s embodiment and therefore *Theotokos*: God-bearer. Life as she had known it and what seemed to be its predictable course – a wedding, a family and the daily and seasonal rhythms of Nazareth – were turned upside down and thrown into confusion. The

crooked ways of God overtook human logic, and if it had not been for another angelic intervention, Joseph, Mary's betrothed, might well have cancelled the wedding.

What was it within Mary that had moved her to say, "Yes"? I think it was her radical availability to God's desire and her deep yearning to be one with that desire, whatever it might cost and wherever it might take her. Her prayer, which was her people's prayer for the consolation of Israel, was a passionate invitation for God to act, to come among his people with an outstretched arm and to set them free from foreign domination and to restore their fortunes. Little did Mary realize how deeply her people's yearning would take root in her, or what wildness on the part of God it would open to her.

Advent, therefore, is more than a season: it is a stance, a way of being. It has to do with entering into the deep yearnings of the human heart for mercy and peace, for justice and love. It has to do with making the hunger of the hungry, the nakedness of the naked, the disease of the diseased our own. And having made them our own, we bring them before the heart of God whose compassion embraces the universe. In so doing, we place ourselves at risk and open ourselves to the possibility that we will be caught up into our prayer and become part of its fulfillment.

Such was the case with Mary. The fortunes of her people, which were identified with a better time yet to come, suddenly became a matter of now and her own willingness to say yes. So it is with us. Often our prayer,

which if it is authentic involves the Spirit praying within us, takes us beyond the safety of our petitions and lands us squarely in the midst of the very thing we are praying about. At such moments we find ourselves, as Mary did, deeply troubled and taken well beyond a place of comfort. If we can stammer, “Yes,” God can do the rest by transfiguring our limitations and weakness with God’s own strength. In this way God in Christ is able to extend the work of Incarnation – the embodiment of God’s compassion – in and through us. Such is our Advent yearning; such is our Advent hope.

May we not shrink back from the deep yearnings the Advent season sets before us in these uncertain times. And may our prayer in union with that of our sister Mary, draw

us into the deep desire of God for our well-being and for that of the world He came among us to heal and to save.”

End of quote – [pause] I couldn't have said it any better myself and I even think that perhaps we have covered the many possible themes which we identified in my opening comments.

Advent is truly a rich season. A season which not only marks our growth in Christ, but our in growth in serving the World which He came to save.

Our Advent prayer must be that we live a holy Advent in hope and love not simply to enable us to truly celebrate a holy Christmas but also to discover and to find our being in Him, the Prince of Peace, Our Lord and Savior.

Amen