

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 23, 2007

Lessons: Psalm 24; Isaiah 7:10-17; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT

Can you imagine the pressure that you would feel if this were to happen to you? But you knew it might happen. Because four weeks ago you committed to take this season of Advent really seriously this year. You have acknowledged that Advent, this first season of the church year, is a great time to really get yourself focused, to think deeply about Jesus' first coming at Bethlehem and his second coming at the end of all things. So for four weeks you have been doing an Advent study, reading each day and staying for a discussion after church. You really have been trying to "watch" and "wait" and to "hope" to experience Jesus' involvement in some way in your life. This was going to be the best Advent of your life.

So as you "waited" and "watched" with great anticipation and expectation, did you have a preconceived idea as to just how Christ's touch on your life might come? As you have sought to be Christ's hands and heart to the world around you, and as you have tried to be "Instruments of Peace", have you perhaps limited the opportunities that are available to you? Have you been as open to seeing God's hand in difficult situations as you have to more pleasant, acceptable ones? For example, as you have "waited" and "watched", how would you have responded if you were suddenly confronted with the experiences that confronted Joseph? How would you have responded when all of your hopes and plans were suddenly threatened by a crisis? How would we have responded?

Think about your expectations and potential responses, and listen to these insightful words by The Very Rev. Charles Hoffacker. Think how they apply to your life...not just in Advent, but to all of your life. Rev. Hoffacker writes:

The simple truth is this: none of us avoids a crisis. All of us have trouble in the course of our lives. Someone may appear to be always on top of the world, but this observation may only show that we do not know that person well.

Take a man who is successful in business, who cannot help, it seems, but make money. He is elegantly dressed -- his shoes are shined, his tie is choice, his cufflinks gleam. He has a warm smile, a firm handshake, a confident voice. But look beyond all that, and find out more.

Get to know the man and you will find that there has been or is still some crisis in his life. Perhaps he had an early failure in business, or a broken marriage, or a handicapped child. Perhaps he feels overwhelmed by cutthroat competition in his business, or he is desperately bored both with his work and his life at home. Appearances can be deceiving! Even the successful, the self-assured, the attractive person has his or her burden to bear. None of us avoids crisis. All of

us have trouble in the course of our lives.

Because this is so, the great difference between people does not lie between those free from trouble and the rest of us. The great difference appears between those people who are vanquished by their problems and those people who find in their problems something worthwhile that redeems the rest. Hoffacker continues:

Today's Gospel tells "the other annunciation story." Not the one about Gabriel appearing to Mary with a message, but the annunciation to Joseph. Joseph-remember him? Before he arrives at the stable in Bethlehem he is simply a young man who wants to marry his fiancée, settle down, make an honest living as a carpenter, and raise a family. Then it happens! Joseph finds out that Mary is pregnant, and knows that he is not the father. He feels betrayed, rejected. The engagement must end, and with it the hope this couple has had for a happy life together.

Joseph decides to end the engagement quietly rather than subject Mary to public disgrace. A quiet ending will spare him and Mary and their families a great deal of grief. But still Joseph is heartsick. Nothing is to come of his love for Mary, nothing at all. She will have no future now, and he does not want the future that probably awaits him. Joseph lies awake at night pondering the apparent horror that has overtaken him. Finally, he falls asleep. But his sleep is not peaceful. His sleep is disturbed by a dream, the sort of dream one still remembers years later.

In his dream a brilliant heavenly figure appears to Joseph -- the angel of the Lord. The angel calls Joseph by name and reminds him that one of his ancestors was David, Israel's greatest king. Then the angel tells Joseph not to be afraid, but to keep his pledge to marry in spite of everything. For the child that Mary carries has no human father, but is from the Holy Spirit. The baby will be a boy, and Jesus is to be his name. That name means Savior. It will be the right name for this child, for somehow he will save his people from their sins.

Joseph wakes up, strangely tranquil, at peace, because of the dream. He does what the angel told him to do. He marries his fiancée as planned, the baby boy is born, and he is named Jesus. People assume that Joseph is his father. But Joseph and Mary know otherwise.

There was a crisis! A great deal of trouble, a menacing dark cloud threatened! And what happened? Joseph is not crushed by the events in his life. Instead, he receives a message that changes everything. But that divine message would have been useless except for one thing: Joseph is willing to hear it and act on it. Indeed, this dream that Joseph has is only the first in a series of important dreams that come to him. Each of them is meant to move him in the right direction, to keep his family out of harm's way. Joseph is willing to hear the message and act on it.

The first dream is the one in which he is directed to marry his fiancée and to name the child that is born to Mary, Jesus. In the next dream, the Lord's angel tells Joseph to take his family to Egypt, for Herod is set on killing the child.

Once Herod is dead, Joseph dreams again and is told to bring his family back to Israel. Yet another dream warns him not to settle in Judea, where the ruler is Herod's son, but to go instead to Nazareth in Galilee. In every instance, Joseph hears the message and acts upon it.

So Joseph faces one crisis after another. He has trouble enough -- and to spare! But he hears the messages intended for him and takes the necessary action. What makes Joseph so receptive? Consider how he is described in today's Gospel. The word applied to him is "righteous." Joseph is a righteous man. He is obedient to God as he knows God. God is not a stranger to Joseph, so when a crisis comes to him and God sends him a message, Joseph hears the message and does what must be done. Joseph was a man of faith before the crisis, so when the crisis comes he is able to act in faith, to do the right thing.

Think about Joseph's story. In his story lies an important reason for us all to live a life of prayer, an important reason for the regular practice of prayer. If we are in relationship with God through a life of prayer, if we value God's company on ordinary days, then, when the day of crisis arrives and our world seems to come apart at the seams, we can recognize God's voice speaking to us at the heart of the crisis, we can respond in faith by doing what God would have us do, by living as God would have us live.

Many people see frightening possibilities in this relationship of humankind to God. Some people say, "Life is challenging enough if you have faith; but what happens to people who have no faith, who do not pray? What happens to them when the inevitable crisis occurs?" Imagine this, people say: "What happens when people without faith lose a loved one? How can they begin to hear God's voice speaking softly to them in their bereavement when their grief shouts so hopelessly? In a troubled time it can be hard for anyone to hear the divine voice, to see the vision of a greater purpose. But how hard it must be without the experience of listening to God in better times!"

God speaks to God's people in a variety of ways. For Joseph, it was through the Jewish law and that remarkable series of dreams. For others, it may happen through the reading of Scripture and through the experience of liturgical worship, through personal devotions, the beauty of nature, the warmth of human love, the circumstance of each day. Our response to God may constitute our prayer. No one who knows about prayer says it is easy. Routine practices of prayer can seem empty at times. There is always something else "waiting in the wings" for us to do.

Yet it is vital that we persist in prayer for a number of reasons. One of the most important is that through our prayer, our response to God, our relationship with God, we become able to recognize the divine voice whenever it speaks, even in the heart of crisis. Times of crisis are sure to come in every life. Where we have a choice is in how we will respond. Will the noise of our own fears drown out everything else, or will we hear God's voice speaking to us at the heart of the crisis? Having heard that voice, will we take the necessary action? Will we be obedient to the message?

Our response is never simply private. What each of us does in response to

God's voice has impact on other lives beyond our ability to reckon. The moment of crisis arrives, we hear the divine voice and act upon it, and what happens to us could be similar to what happened to Joseph: a widespread redemption, unexpected and unstoppable.

The Very Rev. Charles Hoffacker is rector of St. Paul's Church, Port Huron, Michigan, and dean of the Blue Water Convocation in Eastern Michigan, the newest diocese in the Episcopal Church.

Postings

As we leave the Season of Advent and enter into the Christmas season and then the rest of the seasons of the church year, remember these words. Remember that crises will come into each of our lives and how we respond to each crises is important...in fact, as was the case with Joseph, our responses may be *very* important.

AMEN