

ADVENT I – 2021

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.

Amen.

Paul really knows how to tell people he loves them, and he does it so many times in his letters, almost always at the beginning, but every now and then something jumps out in what we now consider part of a later chapter, like today, when he writes: “How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?” Some may think that is about his vanity since he is the one who opened the gospel to them on an earlier visit, but I do not think so. I think Paul has very deep intuition and insight, and he knows that when people get the message, when they begin to look forward in life with hope instead of fear, when they are able to savor, if just for a moment, what is good, and true and holy, that they truly are a new people, a redeemed people, a people who find and experience delight in life more than anything else. His prayer for them is direct and simple: “And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.”

Do you pray for that for those you know and love? I think we do every time we share the peace together just after confession and absolution and just before we receive the Body and Blood of Jesus the Christ. That is about the most profound gift we could wish for anyone. There’s another word that is the opposite of the word “abound.” “Abound” is about fullness, and plenty, and enough, and the riches that come with love. The contrasting word is “abased,” and to be abased is to be brought as low as one can be, to be not only put down, but to be diminished, to have one’s self-confidence and self-worth destroyed.

When we read and listen to Paul and Peter and the other apostles, we hear them proclaiming a message urging people to let go of what pulls them down, of what “de-bases” them, and open themselves to an ever-new possibility in life. When we listen to the prophets, even when they speak of doom and destruction, it is not a revelation of what God **wants** to do to hurt them; it is a consequence of the self-destructive path they are on.

However, when we read the psalms, we come to a different message, for here we are listening not to God’s voice as given to the prophets, here we are listening to the very human voices of those who suffer what they see as injustice or harm or the malice of others, and so often their prayer is little more than revenge, asking God to destroy a fellow human being, or a whole group of them. Yesterday in MP we read Psalm 137, of which the first six verses are this wonderful hymn about the Jerusalem they remember and cannot see any more since they are in captivity, and it has been destroyed. The psalmist asks, “How shall we sing the Lord’s song upon an alien soil?” In other words, how can anyone in this foreign country understand my love for my homeland, my love for my God? The psalmist is afraid his faith and his hope will be mocked by his captors in this strange land. But the psalmist is brought up short, realizing that if he does not sing those songs, if he does not name what he loves, he might forget them, and he might even forget his God. And so he says, “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill.” In other words, may I not be able to defend myself in battle, may I not be able to make a living for myself and my family. That’s a powerful statement of faith from someone just like us.

I want to offer a side comment about the 137th Psalm: when I served an integrated parish in an all-Black neighborhood of Cincinnati in the late 70s and early 80s, I learned how much that psalm spoke to those who had been taken captive in Africa and brought to this country as slaves.

It was not part of their native tradition, but when they received Christianity and heard this psalm it spoke to them profoundly because it spoke about them and about the suffering they endured being away from all they knew as home. For the Israelites, the Babylonian captivity was long, over forty years away from home, not only in a second generation, but beginning a third. Even those in the third generation knew that psalm and knew the songs of Jerusalem because they kept on singing them, kept the tradition alive. And so with the slaves, for even many more generations of captivity; they had, deep inside, the memory of freedom, and they kept the hopes and the dreams alive.

I wish the psalmist had stopped with his promise to remember his home and all that he loved, for when he continues, he reveals the rage that still engulfs his soul—a rage because the Babylonians delighted and gloated in the destruction of Jerusalem, saying, “Down with it! Down with it! Even to the ground.” Of course, that is maddening, and little wonder that he should have a strong anger in response, but what he wishes in his anger is about as cruel as anything we might read anywhere: “Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!” That, too, is a powerful statement from someone just like us....

The other two lessons, from Jeremiah, and from Luke’s gospel, which comes from one of the early days of Holy Week, those two lessons are all about fear and hope. Jeremiah describes the promise from God that is intended to give hope, a new branch springing out of Jesse’s tree, in other words, a child to be born of that family who will bring the two gifts we believe need to be inseparable: justice and righteousness. The promise is that this branch, this offshoot will be the Lord’s righteousness. Jeremiah wants to be sure they know what to look for, so they don’t miss this when it comes.

Jesus is also talking about signs, signs in nature—the sun, moon and stars, the roaring of the sea and the high waves. He talks about the confusion that people will have over that, but promises they will see the “Son of Man coming in a cloud,” a reference to the Messiah.

Remember that Jesus has entered the cloud at his Transfiguration and spoke with both Moses and Elijah, so he sees this as a wonderful and not a fearful experience. Jesus, like Jeremiah, is concerned that his followers might miss the wonder of this experience, that it will come and go without their ever seeing it. Every year in Advent we have readings like this which remind us to keep awake, to be alert, to be on the watch, on the lookout for the coming glory. Today we have a warning not to become so bogged down with dissipation, drunkenness and present-day worries that we miss the glory when it comes.

What about you? Are you awake? Are you listening and watching for glory? When I think of the next life, my mind always brings up something I learned from C.S. Lewis who wrote, very simply, “Joy is the serious business of heaven.” *Joy is the serious business of heaven.* If that is true, as I firmly believe it is, then I wonder how we prepare ourselves for joy. I think it is simple to say, but not so simple to do, for it is about practicing joy in this life so that we get a taste of it, we get a longing for it, and we open ourselves to it. The work comes when we have to let go of those things we discover in our lives and in ourselves that block the light of joy, that keep us from seeing it. Those blockers are things like the angers that we carry around in us for days on end, resentments from the past that dull our taste in the present, as well as more mundane things like laziness and slovenliness and sloppiness, all of which curb and curtail our attention span and keep us from being fully present in the moment. We learn joy when we encounter it, and we learn it yet more deeply when we share it, and each experience of both the receiving and the giving stretches our hearts more and more.

I don't know about you, but one of the reasons I go to church, one of the reasons I know I need church is that it keeps reminding me that joy is just around the corner, in the next moment, in the next person, in the next song of a bird I may hear, in the next flower or snowflake I see. I don't want to miss those moments, even though I know there will be many more to come, in the next moment or in the one after that.

I am not one of those people who believe we can read the signs of the end-times in natural disasters, in pandemics, in wars and other battles. Oh, we can read the signs that we are not living well and we may bring disaster upon ourselves, but that is not the will of God, and those who think that way have had bad teachers. The signs come when we see joy happening, when we see beauty, when we see love in bloom, when we see hearts shedding their anger and growing in hope. The signs are about new life, new love, new hope, and they are what prepare us for the everlasting joy in the life to come. *Amen.*

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