

Fourth Sunday of Advent – December 23, 2018 – Good Shepherd Parish

Scripture Reading: Micah 5:1-4a

Thus says the LORD: You, Bethlehem-Ephrathah too small to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel; whose origin is from of old, from ancient times.

Therefore the Lord will give them up, until the time when she who is to give birth has borne, and the rest of his kindred shall return to the children of Israel. He shall stand firm and shepherd his flock by the strength of the LORD, in the majestic name of the LORD, his God; and they shall remain, for now his greatness shall reach to the ends of the earth; he shall be peace.

Psalm: Ps 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19

R. (4) Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.

O shepherd of Israel, hearken,
from your throne upon the cherubim, shine forth.
Rouse your power,
and come to save us.

R. Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.

Once again, O LORD of hosts,
look down from heaven, and see;
take care of this vine,
and protect what your right hand has planted,
the son of man whom you yourself made strong.

R. Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.

May your help be with the man of your right hand,
with the son of man whom you yourself made strong.
Then we will no more withdraw from you;
give us new life, and we will call upon your name.

R. Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 10:5-10

Brothers and sisters: When Christ came into the world, he said: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; in holocausts and sin offerings you took no delight. Then I said, 'As is written of me in the scroll, behold, I come to do your will, O God.'"

First he says, "Sacrifices and offerings, holocausts and sin offerings, you neither desired nor delighted in." These are offered according to the law. Then he says, "Behold, I come to do your will." He takes away the first to establish the second. By this "will," we have been consecrated through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Gospel: Luke 1:39-45

Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice and said,

Blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled."

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Advent Prayer Week 4: Love

Dear Jesus, may the light of your love
always shine in our hearts.
As Christmas draws closer, we marvel
at your great love for us. Let your love
transform every aspect of our lives and
touch everyone we encounter.
Our hearts are open to you, Jesus. Amen.

Prayer to St. Michael

St. Michael the Archangel,
defend us in battle.
Be our defense against the wickedness and
snares of the Devil.
May God rebuke him, we humbly pray,
and do thou, O Prince
of the heavenly hosts,
by the power of God, thrust into hell Satan,
and all the evil spirits,
who prowl about the world
seeking the ruin of souls. Amen.

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INVITATION TO PRAY

Pause for a few moments of silence and enter more deeply into the presence of God.

Proclaim the Scriptures out loud.

As you listen to the gospel be attentive to a word, a phrase, a question, an image, or a feeling that emerges. Reflect on this quietly or share it aloud.

INVITATION TO REFLECT

During Advent, we have been celebrating our emptiness. I suppose this sounds odd, and yet give it a thought. If we were completely filled up, we would have no room to let anyone or anything in. We would be like a clump of mud or a great thick mountain. (Maybe nice to look at, but not so good at relating.) Somewhere in scripture the people ask God to take their hearts of stone and make them into hearts of flesh. Throughout Advent we have been asking especially for that. A time to become aware of God and then thank God for the spacious emptiness that a human heart has within it. Living hearts, not stone ones. Increasing our own emptiness and our own darkness can be frightening. The shade spreads out its kingdom every day here in the Northern hemisphere as Christmas comes nearer. We see less by natural light, and our body systems squirm to readjust. I used to be resentful as the daylight hours got shorter and shorter—and especially when “daylight savings time” collapsed and the dark settled in an hour sooner in the afternoon. It was dark well before I left the office. Depressing.

Finally, a few years ago, I saw some wisdom in deprivation and darkness. Increased dark allows human beings to hunker down inside their shelter, cozy and patient, waiting for the light to come back. This helps them reflect upon themselves: Such small creatures within so vast a night. God says as much to Bethlehem in the First Reading, “You, Bethlehem-Ephrathah, too small to be among the clans of Judah, ...the Lord will give [you] up, until the time when she who is to give birth has given birth.” Light had already come from that darkness, of course. King David traced his origins to Bethlehem, centuries before (see 1 Samuel: 17:12). And of course, Jesus was to be born in the same town. This strange, wide place in the road could produce Kings? It is the same way within our souls. Our darkness and our emptiness are where Jesus is to be born on Christmas. The places in us that are gloomy, angry, or jealous, these form our darkness. The friends who leave us behind, they have a high, family time while we feel so alone—this is where the child will be born. Watch Mary hasten to her cousin’s house, a long trip, on foot, over dirt and sand and rocks, under the hot, hot sun (Gospel). She does not have a need to be coddled and queenly in order to bring forth The Holy One. She does not spend a second worrying whether the way is too hard. Her soul somehow knows about the soft light that will shine from within her. Everything else is in second place. Maybe emptiness can speak humbly from within us too. For a minute or two we could quit trying so hard to make everything alright in our admittedly arduous worlds. Let go and let God. That way we will get to know the one whose “origin is from of old” (First Reading). We might even let him take up his home in us. He can make himself whatever size is needed for our souls. What better Christmas could there be?

INVITATION TO GROUP SHARING

1. If you were expecting a majestic ruler how would you have felt about the stable and manger? When you experience poverty in your life, do you accept it as a meeting place with God or do you run from it?
2. What is the mission of the Messiah? Why is Christ’s offering presented as effective whereas the “sacrifices and offerings, holocausts and sin offerings” of the Old Covenant are made to seem less so?
3. The infant “leaped for joy” in Elizabeth’s womb at the recognition of the soon to be born savior. Discuss this moment as mankind’s welcome to the savior. How close do you come to leaping for joy when you recognize God’s presence in your life?

INVITATION TO ACT

Determine a specific action (individual or group) that flows from your sharing. When choosing an individual action, determine what you will do and share it with the group. When choosing a group action, determine who will take responsibility for different aspects of the action. These should be your primary considerations.

CLOSING INVITATION TO PRAY

Give thanks to God (aloud or silently) for new insights, for desires awakened, for directions clarified, for the gift of one another’s openness and sensitivity. Conclude with the following:

Pour forth, we beseech you, O Lord, your grace into our hearts, that we, to whom the Incarnation of Christ your Son was made know by the message of an Angel, may by his Passion and Cross be brought to the glory of his Resurrection. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen