

1st Sunday of Advent - December 3, 2017

“Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,
with the mountains quaking before you,
while you wrought awesome deeds we could not hope for,
such as they had not heard of from of old.
No ear has ever heard, no eye ever seen, any God but you
doing such deeds for those who wait for him.”

- Isaiah 63

Isaiah was longing for God to DO SOMETHING. And not just anything. He wanted God to do “awesome deeds we could not hope for, such as they had not heard from of old.”

It would be helpful to understand a little more about the context in which Isaiah spoke these words. It was out of a place of utter devastation. The people of Israel had been completely humiliated, defeated and conquered by the Babylonians. They had overrun the land of Judah, completely destroyed the temple of Jerusalem - the temple of Solomon which was the pride and joy of the Israelites. It was reduced to rubble and the treasures of the temple were carried off to Babylon as spoils of war. This was the situation from which the prophet Isaiah spoke. As we see, however, he wasn't just asking God to make it like it was before. He wasn't looking for things to get back to how they were . . . the good old days. Whatever that means. He dared to hope for something that he couldn't even imagine. So, what do we want here, in our parish? In our community? Do we really want God to do, as Isaiah put it, “awesome deeds we could not hope for?” In other words, are we dreaming dreams that go beyond anything we ourselves could dream up? This weekend, I begin a series of talks to start tracing an outline of a vision for our parish community. Pray with me, that

this vision of which I speak is not just something made up, “out of my own head.” It’s a vision that I’m feeling compelled to share . . . a vision of what we are called to become as a parish in our part of the world in this day and age into which God has placed us . . . and missioned us - commissioned us - to become who we are meant to be. It’s a vision that, naturally, will continually need development - because my limited human capacity to imagine and articulate will ALWAYS fall short of God’s imagination, God’s dream. You heard me right - God’s dream. God has a dream, a vision, for you, for me, for this parish community - and as your pastor I’m failing you if I do not work at stretching my vision - and yours - in an attempt to think and dream like God . . . and to beg God that He would plant His own vision, and ignite His own passion in our hearts & minds.

The prophet Isaiah, again: “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, with the mountains quaking before you, while you wrought awesome deeds we could not hope for . . .”

GOD INTENDS TO DO AWESOME DEEDS WE COULD NOT HOPE FOR . . . deeds of which “no ear has ever heard, no eye ever seen.” What God was telling the Israelites, and what he is telling us is, simply, **DON’T aim too low here.** There are great things in store for this parish - but it’s not a matter of sitting around and waiting for things to happen, either. Even as we are to “wait for Him,” God expects us to act, to move.

Our first act, our first move, while also waiting, is to express - even if somewhat trembling with nervous anticipation - to express what that dream, that vision of God may well be.

So - what do I have in mind as a vision for our parish community? First, let me explain what a vision is NOT - only then can we appreciate what it is. First, a vision is not a plan. A vision is not a “program.” A vision is not a series of specific actions. A VISION IS A DREAM - OR, IF YOU WILL, A VISION IS A DESCRIPTION OF A DESTINATION. When you decide to take a journey, you need to have a destination in mind. And if you start out on a journey with no particular destination in mind, then then it’s not really a journey - it’s merely aimless wandering. SO OUR VISION IS A DESCRIPTION OF WHERE WE OUGHT TO GO. Only when we have a destination in mind can we start taking deliberate steps to get there, moving in the right direction. Only when we have a destination in mind does trying to figure out which mode of travel, what provisions to take, what direction to go in and so on, make sense. Taking steps in the right direction means taking steps that will move us toward the destination. Taking steps toward the destination, in this case, means taking steps toward making the dream a reality.

So let me describe a destination for you. It’s where we need to go as a parish . . .

A VISION FOR THE PARISH COMMUNITY IN MASSENA/LOUISVILLE

I want a parish full of people who are engaged and joyful and growing in their relationship with Christ and contagious with this faith . . .

A parish that is not closed in on itself and self-absorbed, but rather a parish that is constantly searching out, inviting, and welcoming everyone into an encounter with

Jesus Christ and His Church - that is, a parish in which an encounter with the Church is simultaneously an encounter with Jesus Christ and life in His Holy Spirit. A parish that truly is a community where people from the outside look and say, "wow - what do they have, because I want it!" Those people are to have an "entry ramp" of welcome, engagement, belonging and accompaniment through their ups and downs, questions and problems.

A place where the liturgy is truly uplifting, beautiful, reverent, and in accord with the mind of the Church . . . where a sense of wonder and awe, joy, and the reality of Christ's presence is palpable.

A parish of engaged disciples who are constantly filling the ranks of volunteers for service both within and outside the physical walls of any of our worship sites.

A parish where all have a sense of belonging, which includes a sense of responsibility for the ongoing life, health, growth and vitality of the community.

Some may say, "but we are not always joyful, inviting, welcoming." Some may say, "people don't seem to really WANT to come and see what God has to offer them here." Some might say, "not nearly enough people really are engaged, or have a sense of responsibility for the life, health, growth and well-being of the parish." Some are saying "our parish community is not full of eager volunteers to spread the Gospel or do the work that is needed to thrive here." Well, that may be true - but, what are we going to do about that? That is not a valid criticism of the vision. Pointing out that what is expressed in the vision is not our present reality . . . is not a valid criticism.

What if I said to you, "let's go to California, to bask in glorious sunshine along the beautiful beaches, to hear the seagulls cry, to hear and watch the waves crashing on the coast, and even to ride those waves with exhilaration." One might respond, "that sounds nice, but we are not in

California, and I can't hear any waves or seagulls, and I don't see or feel any glorious sunshine as it sparkles off the waves of the Pacific Ocean!" That is not a valid criticism - in fact, it makes no sense at all. The reason I said "let's go to California" is because we aren't there now - but we could be - if we began a journey, and started taking deliberate steps to get there. OUR VISION IS MEANT TO DESCRIBE A DESTINATION, AND TO INFLAME A DESIRE TO TAKE STEPS TO GET THERE. It's a place far more glorious than the most perfect day at the beach or any other place on this earth. It's the Kingdom of Heaven. The vision for our parish is meant to be a more authentic and concrete realization of the Kingdom of Heaven in our midst, in which Christ says we can already start living, even as we make our way through this valley of tears.

So let's not try to do too much here today - this is just the beginning - stating the vision, telling the dream, describing the destination. In the coming weeks, I'm going to be working at explaining more fully what the vision actually means, and what we are going to have to start doing, to set out on our journey toward the destination.

I'm going to need help doing it though. And we will all need help in acquiring God's way of thinking, of dreaming for us - and then acting on it. To that end, I want to you to join me in a Novena of Wednesday evenings of prayer, starting this coming Wednesday, December 6th (feast of St. Nicholas!) at Sacred Heart Church at 6:30pm. 9 consecutive Wednesdays starting this week, and running through to the end of January, 6:30pm at Sacred Heart. If you can't be there on Wednesday evenings at 6:30, you might still consider stopping at 6:30 on Wednesdays, wherever you are,

and offering a prayer for me and for the parish, as I do for you as well. Nothing fancy, nothing more than showing up and praying for about a half-hour to an hour, in silence and with some spoken words, to intercede for our parish and one another. And to beg God for the grace that I might be a better pastor for you - and that we might all do our part in contributing to the progress we are to make together, on our journey toward the destination - the vision - which God wants to plant in our hearts . . . in a word, to make Isaiah's plea my own - our own:

"Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,
with the mountains quaking before you,
while you wrought awesome deeds we could not hope for,
such as they had not heard of from of old.

No ear has ever heard, no eye ever seen, any God but you
doing such deeds for those who wait for him."

Yes Lord, we wait for you, and we beg you - do awesome deeds in us that go beyond our hopes: renew us, renew our parish, renew our community, renew the face of the earth. Amen.