

## Second Sunday of Advent

Year B

Is 40:1-5, 9-11

Ps 85:9-10-11-12, 13-14

II Pt 3:8-14

Mk 1:1-8

Paul F. Morrissey, O.S.A.

Do you ever think that a Gospel might be heard differently depending on *who* hears it or *where* it is heard? Recently, I had the opportunity to attend a Mass in a prison here in Philadelphia. I am learning how to assist the chaplain and accompanied him to a liturgy he celebrated in the House of Correction. From my vantage point in the midst of the inmates, I was struck at how they might be hearing the Gospel of Matthew 25, the one where Jesus tells how we will be judged for when we “visited him when he was ill, in prison, etc.” At the very least, I experienced men slowed down, stuck in a place of powerlessness if you will, perhaps even empty but open, actually listening because of their immobility.

As I see myself and others spun this way and that at so many driven concerns, I have been wondering since then: do we need to be in prison for us to slow down and listen? Maybe we *are* in prison already and we don’t even know it. The prison of doing. Of driven activity. Busyness. The fear of emptiness that can often be underneath this. Henri Nouwen writes in his book of meditations:

It is very hard to allow emptiness to exist in our lives. Emptiness requires a willingness not to be in control, a willingness to let something new and unexpected happen. It requires trust, surrender, and openness to guidance. God wants to dwell in our emptiness. But as long as we are afraid of God and God’s actions in our lives, it is unlikely that we will offer our emptiness to God. Let’s pray that we can let go of our fear of God and embrace God as the source of all love.

It is Advent again, a time for slowing down...for waiting...and being. A time to actually believe that God is present in our midst and acting in our behalf. A time to stop the idolatry of substituting our action for what we believe is God’s *inaction*. A time for contemplation. (I am not speaking about laziness, entitlement, and a welfare attitude here. God knows the difference).

From this vantage point of our prison, whatever it is, listen to the words of Isaiah in a new way:

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people,  
says your God.  
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
And proclaim to her  
That her service is at an end,  
Her guilt is expiated.

And John the Baptist. What might he be a symbol of for us today? He is the forerunner, the necessary first step in the coming of our Savior. The first step of doing, of preaching, of fasting, of building that highway for our God - even of visiting people in prison. But he is, as he tells us, not the fulfillment of the long-awaited promise. Do we ever allow ourselves to get to the second step? The second and crucial step of the stillness and quiet. The empty bowl of our powerlessness, waiting to be filled by the Lord, symbolized by the manger and stable and virginity of the Bethlehem scene. As obsessed with sex as our world and Church are, we might even ask ourselves if we are actually more promiscuous in our compulsive busyness than in our sexual activity?

I believe God is begging us in his word to us today:

- During this season, find some moments each morning before your Palm Pilot clicks on with all your agenda for the day, even that of saving the world if you could.
- Then sit quietly.
- Be in prison for a moment or three where you cannot get out.
- Let God's Spirit hover over these waters, this chaos, ever so subtly baptizing you in this emptiness and waiting.
- Let Jesus Christ slowly fill you and love you, reassure you and quietly comfort you like a lamb.
- Listen and hear...  
That your warfare, your warfare is at an end,  
your guilt is expiated,  
your salvation is at hand.

It is Advent once again. "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people," says your God.