

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Year A

Isa 7: 10-14

Psalm 24

Romans 1: 1-7

Matthew 1: 18-24

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=Tis the Season

A few nights ago I awoke in the early morning around 5am for some reason or another. As I attempted to roll over and get another couple hours of desperately needed sleep, thoughts of my busy day, my busy week, began to fly around in my head. Instead of falling back asleep I began to organize my day, making lists in my mind. No matter how hard I tried I could not close my eyes. Resigned that this was my fate, I decided to make a productive start to an activity packed day, so I laced up my sneakers and hit the dark roads for an early morning jog.

The first thing that struck me about the shadowy morning was the absolute stillness. There was little to no traffic activity and consequently very little noise. As I wound through my suburban neighborhood I suddenly heard the sound of running water! I looked to my left and discovered a creek in a wooded area whose sound had caught my attention for the first time. About a quarter of a mile later I crossed a section of the creek I had been previously aware of, and I made the connection of where it flowed, marveling at how clear its sounds were at that hour of the morning.

Having had that experience it occurred to me that I might never have noticed these things had I not done things differently that morning. Usually, by the time I lace up and hit the road rush-hour is well in swing and the sounds of the neighborhood are muted by the haste of commuters and children hurrying to school. I suddenly realized that I had a very advent experience; I had experienced the familiar differently.

Christmas is a time of year when people speak of generosity, and the lyrics of songs proclaim "peace on earth, good will to all". But the reality of the season seems to differ from the imagination it encourages. People are frazzled with the amount of obligations they feel compelled to fulfill, frustrated with crowds and parking in shopping areas, and tense over how many extra activities are required to be a person of good cheer. The hope of peace and goodwill oftentimes gives way to the honking of horns and the early morning awakenings that refuse sleep due to pressure and activity-induced anxiety.

And yet, the beauty of our faith calls us throughout this season to something different from the fare which popular culture recommends for our

consumption. We are called to moments of reflection, to spiritual anticipation rather than emotional expenditure, and in general a type of holiday preparation which see things differently by fulfilling our holiday obligations differently. Advent encourages Catholics to refrain, to restrain, and ultimately maintain the peace and joy which this season struggles to embody.

Our scripture readings throughout the season have been just these types of holiday messages, guidelines if you will, to help us envision and experience things differently. In particular, the words of the prophet Isaiah illustrate for us that seeing the world differently is not merely a coping mechanism for hectic lifestyles, but is actually a glimpse into the reality of the world as God envisions it, as God intends it to be ordered. In week one the prophet proclaimed that swords would be hammered into ploughshares and spears into sickles, nations not rising in war against other nations. In week two he decreed that in God's plan the lion would lay down with the lamb and the child play near the cobra's den. In week three, that the blind shall have their eyes opened and the deaf have their ears unsealed. And finally, on this the Fourth Sunday of Advent Isaiah tells us how these things will be brought about; through the birth of a child by a maiden, proclaiming that God would no longer remain at a distance, but instead will join us on earth to instruct us with his very person how to fulfill the visions of the prophets of the ages past.

My brothers and sisters, the words of the prophet Isaiah are not the fantasy or the magical imagination that the words which express the meaning of the secular season are. Rather, these are words to live by, words to hope for, words to embody with our lives and our actions. The words of preparation which the church has set forth for us during Advent are not words which inspire a domesticated vision of the quaint pastoral birth of a king, but are, rather, words of social opposition to the ordering which mankind imposes on reality against the plan of God. What appears to be completely incongruous in the imagination of humanity is, in fact, the plan of God for the whole created order!

In Matthew's Gospel last Sunday Jesus, speaking of John the Baptist, asked the question "What did you expect?" This is the perfect Advent question. Do we try to control our expectations of God or do we allow God to have expectations of us? Do we imagine the world as we would like it to be ordered or do we work for the order which God commands? Do we hear what we believe in the scripture or do we believe what we hear? The subtle difference between these two approaches to our faith, us being supported in our lives by scripture rather than being challenged by it, allows for the conditions in contemporary culture for people to claim themselves as Christian while ignoring the imperatives of the scripture. It allows people to pick and choose what their issues of justice and peace are based on personal bias rather than the ideas of justice and peace written in scripture. For example, the person who claims to be pro-life and yet advocates the death penalty; the individual who claims to want justice for the poor and oppressed but supports governments and institutions which protect the wealthy; those whose concerns is for the innocent who die at home and not the innocent who die in Africa. These are painful tensions,

irreconcilable in the human view of the world, but entirely reconcilable in the kingdom of God.

But what of today's gospel? Is this not the pastoral vision of a child waiting to be born, his mother and her husband preparing for the tender birth in the manger? I would suggest no. Mary is the essence of incongruity and justice in the plan of God for humankind. She was a child herself, of no status in society, and even worse, unmarried at the time of the conception. And yet, she is God's plan! Her trust in belief in what she heard helped her to conquer her fear and except God's plan over her own thoughts of personal well-being. Her faith led her to see differently, her hope allowed her to act differently.

This glorious season of preparation invites us to listen to the word of God, to eat from the sacred table in the presence of the community, and to become different; not only from the rest of the society, but from what we were before the season began. If we believe what the scripture calls us to believe, God's plan, His vision for the world is radical and requires a people with the courage to trust in God not in man. Man brings us war, teaches us it is ok to care for some and not others, spells out a hierarchy for morality. God's vision is less of a catalog of right and wrong and more of a radical dislodgement of our categories; a vision in which peace and goodwill are the entitlement of all. We give birth to Christ in our world through our vision, our compassion, our forgiveness, and perhaps most importantly our ability to see and hear things differently from humanity, to see and hear things as God would have us do.