

## Fourth Sunday of Advent

Year B

II Sm 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16

Ps 89:2-3, 4-5, 27, 29

Rom 16:25-27

Lk 1:26-38

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Recently I was playing hide and seek with some of my nieces and nephews, and the youngest, Bernadette, managed to sneak up behind me and toss her “Dora the Explorer” doll at my head, with surprising force and accuracy. Laughing, I grabbed her and said, “That’s it! Forty whacks with a wet noodle for you!” To which my sister, watching the scene, replied, “Jeez, could you sound any more like Mom?”

With an even greater shock than the one caused by the Dora doll, I realized my sister was right. My mother used that expression all the time, and in exactly the same setting, when she was playing with us, chasing us through the house, or laughing at our escapades. Of course, as my brothers and sisters and I got older, Mom tended to drop the “wet noodle” part of the expression, and focus more on the “forty whacks” part. And when she was chasing us through the house, she usually wasn’t laughing.

How many times a day do we say or do things we learned from our parents? Sometimes we remember who they came from, sometimes not, but just as we receive the color of our eyes and hair from Mom and Dad, so too from our earliest days we pick up countless little turns of phrase and proverbs, bits of wisdom and funny sayings. Even the way we laugh, or what we do with our hands when we talk, or how we set our faces when we’re serious - how many of these show a family resemblance?

As it is with all of us, so must it have been with Jesus, true God and true man, one like us in all things except sin (Heb 4:15). How many times in the course of his childhood did Mary look at Jesus and see herself. “Look at him - he has my eyes.” “Ah, that’s just the way my father used to smile.” “That nose and mouth - he’s the image of my mother!”

And as it is with all of us, Jesus receives more than appearance and behavior from his mother. Jesus says things as an adult which he learned at the lap of the Blessed Mother. She heard Gabriel’s words - “Do not be afraid” - and she taught them to her son. How often he repeats as a man the words he learned as a child! When his disciples are caught in a storm at sea and in danger of drowning, Jesus walks to them on the waves and called out, “Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid.” (Matthew 14:27) When Jairus begs Jesus to cure his daughter, and word is received that she had already died, Jesus says, ‘Do not be afraid; just have faith.’” (Mark 5:35-36) When his disciples grow fearful about being persecuted, the Lord comforts them with these words: “Are not five sparrows sold for two small coins? Yet not one of them has escaped the notice of God. Even the hairs of your head have all been counted. Do not be afraid. You are worth more than many sparrows.... “Do not be afraid any longer, little flock, for your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom.” (Luke 12:6-7,32) And when Christ is transfigured before Peter, James, and John, and a mighty voice spills forth from the heavens - “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” - the disciples fall to the ground in terror, Jesus bends over, and touches

each of them in turn, and whispers, "Rise, and do not be afraid." (Matthew 17:7) Even after Jesus suffers and died, after he lays in the tomb and descends into hell, after he rises from death and walks out of the tomb, he repeats the words of his mother when he appears to Mary Magdalene: "Do not be afraid. Go tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me." (Matthew 28:10) And when St. Paul preaches the gospel in Corinth and meets with threats and harsh opposition, the Lord visits him in a vision, and says, "Do not be afraid. Go on speaking, and do not be silent, for I am with you." (Acts 18:9-10).

So, too, did Mary hear the words of Gabriel - "nothing will be impossible for God" - and she taught them to her son. Jesus teaches his disciples that it is hard to enter the kingdom of God, that you must be like a child, you must keep the commandments, you must give your possessions to the poor, that you must take up your cross and walk the narrow way. And his disciples are astonished, and ask, "Then who can be saved?" And Jesus comforts them with the words his mother taught him: "For human beings it is impossible, but not for God. All things are possible for God." (Mark 10:25-27)

And most wonderful of all, Mary taught her son the words she spoke to Gabriel: "May it be done to me according to your word." Jesus learns this lesson so well, that when he becomes a man, he teaches his followers to repeat his mother's words: "Your kingdom come, your will be done." Jesus learns this lesson so well, that when he enters upon the hour of his greatest trial, when the temptation to walk away, to save himself, must have welled up in him like a geyser in the desert, he falls to his knees in the garden of Gethsemane and prays as his mother taught him: "Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me; still, not my will but yours be done." (Luke 22:42)

"Do not be afraid," "with God all things are possible," "your will be done" - these are words at the heart of the gospel. These are the words of Jesus' tough love: the call to hope instead of fear in the face of the hardships of this world; the call to repentance and trust in the face of our resilient and heavy sins; the call to obey, the call to straighten our backs and steady our hands and work to make God's will real for the poor, the sick, the stranger, and the lost. These are not easy words, though they are filled with comfort; these are not weak words, though they pulse with compassion; these words are not sentimental, childish, or soft. They are commands, hard commands: to be strong as the lion of Judah, to be fearless as a prophet, to be obedient as an angel. Not on our own, not by our own strength, not through our own virtue, but through the strength of the Holy Spirit which comes upon every Christian, which seeks to set each Christian heart on fire.. These are words which say: "Grow up. Be strong. Be faithful. Be just."

Is it any surprise that Jesus learned these words from his mother?