

First Impressions **FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT -C-**
Micah 5: 1-4 Psalm 84 Hebrews 10: 5-10 Luke 1: 39-45
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Today is the fourth Sunday of Advent; but tomorrow is Christmas. Whatever spirit of Advent waiting, reflection and hope we were able to maintain these weeks amid the commercialism of the season, is most likely going to be shattered to smithereens today! The stores will remain open late for last minute shopping and households will be frenetically preparing feast, family and friends for tomorrow. There is a lot to do today, fourth Sunday of Advent, or not. We have hope for a lovely time tomorrow, we who celebrate Christ's birth in a manger. With the image of the infant in the manger before us today, we hope we have been generous to the poor, so that all will also have something to celebrate tomorrow. But whatever happens it will all be over tomorrow night.

Tuesday the decorations will come down in store windows and many homes. They will be packed away till next year or discarded on the curbside with the still-green Christmas trees. Most of us will have to get up early on Tuesday, as we usually do on a regular workday. Whatever type of Christmas celebration we had, warm and loving or chilly and solitary—it will end tomorrow night, and the world can go on with its usual routine.

Except that's not all there is to Christmas. No, not by a long shot. It is not an isolated feast that comes near the end of the year. The Christmas season doesn't end till the feast of the Baptism of the Lord, January 8th. Christmas is not the end; it's at the beginning. It starts a journey for us that will take us through Jesus' ministry, suffering, death and resurrection. We not only affirm our belief in God's taking flesh and dwelling among us, but Christmas begins to ask us the question: Will we pattern our life on Jesus' and affirm our faith in the new life he makes possible for us through his cross and resurrection?

The prophet Micah begins to open the mystery we are preparing to celebrate tomorrow and through the rest of our lives. He lived in the eight century before Christ at a time of prosperity and corrupt leadership. Micah foresaw ruin for Israel and the destruction of Jerusalem. He was disappointed that Israel's kings had failed to live up to people's messianic hopes for a just and holy king. So, Micah looked

elsewhere for the one who would bring God's salvation to the world.

Peace happens in very concrete ways: people forgive one another; rulers engage in dialogue, rather than confrontation, with neighboring nations; families and clans put aside past injuries and the memory of ancestral grievances; the poor are helped and welcomed as full members of the community, etc. So, when prophets, like Micah, envision a peaceable kingdom, God's salvation, they express hope in a messiah whose coming will initiate a new and peaceful age. That's what Micah tells his people about the messiah, "He shall stand firm and tend his flock...his greatness shall reach to the ends of the earth; he shall be peace. The first Christians saw in Jesus the fulfillment of this hope. Jesus was from Bethlehem, from David the shepherd king's home and like David would "tend his flock."

Since the greatest powers, then and now, don't seem to be very good at bringing peace to the world, God has chosen an alternate way to peace, not through powerful cities and worldly power, but through Bethlehem. God chose to act small, to surprise the world and challenge how we normally think and act to "get things done." "Big and powerful" may be good for doing some things; but the prophet tells us to look elsewhere. Peace will come through the small and insignificant.

Of course, we do our best to support national and international peace movements. But our personal training ground for peace will be our daily lives. In the ordinary encounters with others, we will practice peace. As the hymn says, "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me." We will practice peacemaking: not returning angry words with more angry words; not holding grudges; not bullying subordinates at work; not shouting at home; not getting our way because we have power over others; not seeking to win arguments but becoming a partner in dialogue. Call it the "Bethlehem Principle" but to bring peace to the earth through people like us and in the seeming insignificant moments and places of our lives

Hebrews reinforces what Micah has said. Jesus saved us by being obedient to God. Burning incense and offering sacrifice in the Temple weren't enough. We needed Jesus and what he did to get the message of God's favor across to us. The divine presence was embodied so we could see and hear what peace is. Peace has taken flesh for our benefit so we wouldn't miss the message God had for us. As Micah says, "He shall be peace."

Jesus became one of us and, like us, was challenged daily to choose other means to accomplish his will. But he is our peace. He lived our life in a different way and in doing showed us that peace can take flesh in each of us through the gift of God's Spirit. Jesus "different way" is really God's way and is what God had in mind for us when God created us in God's image and likeness. With the Spirit's enabling power we are Christ-bearers, we too enflesh his peace into the world.

Elizabeth blesses Mary for her hearing and accepting the message she received from the angel. It all begins in such a small way, two pregnant women greeting one another and recognizing the presence and greatness of their God. Elisabeth's eyes perceive what others will miss: Mary is "the mother of my Lord."

Insignificant Israel and two vulnerable women, Micah's prophecy is fulfilled. Something great is happening and only those with faith who look towards Bethlehem will see its fruition. Meanwhile, the rest of the world is distracted, then and now, by the noise and pomp of military might and courtly splendor. John the Baptist and Jesus have two good teachers in the mothers we observe today. From them, the Lord's prophet John and the savior Jesus, will learn to trust God even when the mighty ignore and then turn on them. God has made a promise, and it will not be thwarted.

At times the Church feels as small and as vulnerable as these two women. Believers go about their daily jobs and responsibilities in small and seeming unimportant ways. But though the powerful are here today, gone tomorrow, the faithful little ones of God (like tiny Bethlehem) turn out to surprise us, for among them, new life springs and we are given reason to hope that God has not abandoned us. It's just that we have been looking for signs in the wrong places. Micah, Elizabeth and Mary teach us to look in the little places and events to find God's promise being fulfilled.

The time of fulfillment is at hand. It doesn't end on Christmas night after the holiday is over. Just as God has been gracious to Elizabeth and Mary, so are we the beneficiaries of grace, we who believe that, "what was spoken to us by the Lord would be fulfilled." We join Elizabeth in praising Mary, who assented to being God's servant. And we join Mary as we too say "Yes" and trust God's good intentions and plans for us.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

-Clyde F. Crews, SEASONS OF THE SPIRIT: EXPLORING CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUALITY (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1992) page 15. ISBN 0-

8146-2081-7

Crews chairs the theology department at Bellarmine College in Louisville, Kentucky. The book is a collection of thoughtful essays on the feasts and seasons of the Christian year and on discipleship in the modern world. The book also includes two prayers, one for morning the other for evening. The preacher will find in these essays a disciple's meditative reflections on living as a member of the Christian community and facing the challenge to bring the gospel message into the complexities of daily life. I found his essays on the liturgical seasons helpful at the beginning of each season.

QUOTABLE

Christmas teaches us:

- about the triumph of ordinary things well done, even when we don't want to do them;
- about our need to become childlike in our trust but parental and adult in our responsibilities;
- about our need to live patiently with the imperfections in ourselves and with the unexpected around ourselves;
- that we have been freed from the awful responsibility of having to grasp at life's meaning or the desperation of having to force our own purposes upon it;
- that meaning is already in our midst if we are patient and listen and learn. We don't need to grab for eternity. It has sought us out. Cradled us and called us by name. It has told us to live our little lives well.

----Clyde F. Crews, page 15.

JUSTICE NOTES

Open our eyes that they may see the deepest needs of people;
move our hands that they may feed the hungry;
touch our hearts that we may bring warmth to the despairing;
teach us the generosity that welcomes strangers;
let us share our possessions to clothe the naked;
give us the care that strengthens the sick;
make us share in the quest to set the prisoner free.
In sharing our anxieties and our love,
our poverty and prosperity,
we partake of your divine presence.

---Zimbabwe-CRS , quoted by Mary Doyle in the Social Justice News of the Oakland diocese

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

"It is time to abandon the death penalty -- not just because of what it does to those who are executed, but because of how it diminishes all of us... We ask all Catholics--pastors, catechists, educators and parishioners -- to join us in rethinking this difficult issue and committing ourselves to pursuing justice without vengeance. With our Holy Father, we seek to build a society so committed to human life that it will not sanction the killing of any human person.

-----("Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice," U.S. Catholic Bishops, Nov. 2000,)

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty." Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Jeffrey Kandies #0221506 (On death row since 4/20/94)
- Vincent M. Wooten #0453231 (4/29/94)
- John R. Elliott #0120038 (5/4/94)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

Jude Siciliano, OP

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