

## Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 20, 2020

Reflection by Sister Judith Murphy, OSB

2 SM 7:1-5, 8B-12, 14A, 16; ROM 16:25-27; LK 1:26-38

Advent can be such a season of wonder, full of symbol and hope: memories of simple joys and happiness; memories from our own childhood, or classic movies like “It’s a Wonderful Life” or “The Christmas Story”, or from working with or being the wide-eyed children learning a little self-control while dreaming up what to hope for from Santa. Thinking of little, thoughtful ways to be in touch with friends and family in the spirit of Christmas. Planning the decorations and the menus and warm festivities to observe Christmas once again. These were ways we could get ready to hear again year after year the stories of the people of God looking forward in promise to the coming of the Savior. Somehow knowing how the story would turn out. The hope of God in search of human beings, as Rabbi Heschel taught.

This year we are having an opportunity for a different experience in our day to day life,--- perhaps an experience we would prefer not to be having--- with a taste of unknowing, of mystery -- that people know in times or places of war or famine, // or in times and places where there is no peace. // We are having an opportunity to know for ourselves what it is like to be in need of hope. // To know the uncertainty that other people in our world experience close up much of the time. To not know how the story will turn out.

Living through a global pandemic may carry unusual gifts for us--- in our very experience of uncertainty and our lack of power in the face of something so big and mysterious and that affects us all in the global community. Against this background of the pandemic we can hear the Scripture readings this with new and different ears; together to recognize our neediness, to share together our need and hope for encouragement.

There is something in this time of not knowing that reminds me of an experience of helplessness I had several years ago. I had gone to Colorado to visit Sister Karen in Grand Junction and was traveling by bus from Denver to Grand Junction. I can’t remember exactly the details right now, but I was in a crowded Greyhound Bus Depot where many people were hoping to make connections to get where they (we) thought --- or hoped ---we were going. A snowstorm

in the mountains had wreaked havoc on all the bus schedules and lots of connections were missed or delayed; another bus might come, but who who knew?

But there we were: dependent on solutions beyond our control. Everyone pretty much in the same state of disappointment and insecurity. No one feeling or expressing entitlement to better treatment; no one able to pull strings to change anything to the better for themselves. We were in it together. And there was a remarkable spirit in most of the group—a spirit of sharing what little we had as much as possible, sharing little snacks, holding one’s place in line, helping to watch a baby while the parent went to the bathroom. It struck me that this might be like the feeling in the crowds where Jesus taught. A group without entitlement, together, and ready to listen to Jesus; where Jesus could come to teach and preach his good news. There was not much feeling of self-sufficiency. We were ripe for good news, anxious like those who came to hear Jesus, or some of them anyway, ready to hear, as I think we are or can be now, in the face of our shared insecurity about the pandemic. Perhaps this year we can hear with different ears the message//that God wants our good... that God does watch over God’s people.

Our collect prayer for today— says: Pour forth, we beseech you, O Lord, your grace into our hearts; that we to whom the Incarnation of Christ your Son was made known by the message of an angel, may by his Passion and Cross be bought to the glory of his Resurrection. ----Right away at Christ’s birth, there is the reminder that the cross is coming --calling us to keep in mind where this story is going. And, of course, in between the birth and the cross there is Jesus, the master teacher, teaching us how to find the fullness of life in learning to care for one another, to care for those in need, learning to take turns, giving and receiving.

Our readings today are rich in meaning for us as a people in hope of salvation. There are stories of contradiction; there are symbols that enrich our hope in this Advent time of waiting for the promised savior: the symbol of the Advent wreath—the unending circle of the wreath that is ever green, pointing us toward hope of unending life; and there is the light growing as more candles on the wreath are lit; and starting tomorrow, after the longest night, nature itself cooperating as darkness begins to recede---darkness giving way to more light, darkness losing its power: daylight gradually becoming longer, (at least in our northern hemisphere).

Grateful David in the first reading wants to honor God by building him a house, in recognition of God giving David rest from his enemies. But we see that perhaps David misunderstands himself and perhaps he misunderstands his God, as well. David thought he would build a house for God. And God says through the prophet Nathan: Not so fast, David. It was I who brought you from tending sheep, to be the leader of my people Israel. You want to build me a house? Watch this: you think you will build a house for me? It is ***I who will build a house for you*** (and here “you” starts to reference the collective **YOU of all people**. In you I will build a house for my people Israel. Paul today goes on to call the Romans (and us) to recognize that this message of salvation is meant not just for Israel, but for all the nations,-- to bring all people into right relationship with God: God who had sought to be in direct covenant with all people, writing the law of God on our hearts.

In our gospel we see Mary, faithful daughter of Israel, was greatly troubled when the angel told her that she, Mary had found favor with God, and that she was to be the mother of a son to be named Jesus, who would be the son of the most High...and in another little while the wise men will show up following the message in a star, announcing the one who is to come... even for those nations beyond Israel.

Mary, faithful daughter of Israel was aware of her own insufficiency. How can this be? she says. I have had no relation with a man. The angel tells her God will overshadow her and overshadow her insufficiency. She --Mary-- was to be the mother of him who is the Son of God. And through it all, we too can learn to recognize our insufficiency, acknowledging our need for the grace of God.

How wonderful that Jesus took on our human life, that the eternal word of God became one of us. ...to teach us how to live the gift of our human life well, as John Lewis suggests, “getting into good trouble”, strengthening the Beloved Community in our human community.

We ask God to *pour forth your grace* into our hearts. Karl Rahner in his theology of grace emphasizes that grace emerges from the innermost center of us and our world // not as *a particular phenomenon alongside the rest of our life*... Grace is simply the last depth and radical meaning of **all** that we // as created people *experience, enact, and suffer* in the process of developing and realizing ourselves as persons, as our God continues to create us. Even now. Rahner says: *When someone lives as they would like to live,*

*combating their own egoism and the continual temptation to inner despair, there is the event of grace.* This is a season of grace, a time when we can learn once again our need for God's grace and learn again also the freedom there is in acknowledging our needs for God's grace.

In this time of the pandemic, this year, we may have a little more time and willingness to ponder the themes of the season, maybe especially our need for the grace of our loving creator God, and ***to let our hope for that grace to be nurtured.***

Pour forth, we beseech you, O Lord, your grace into our hearts, that we, to whom the Incarnation of Christ your Son was made known by the message of an angel, may by his Passion and Cross be brought to the glory of his Resurrection. In our God we pray.