

4th Sunday of Advent (Cycle A)

December 23, 2007 -- Deacon Bill Nourse, Ed.D.

INTRODUCTION

Once more, I'm just back from my Advent retreat. I spent a few days at the Trappist monastery in Kentucky last week. I started going there in December of 1990. I go up there to try to get my head back on straight – this year, after a kind of confusing year. Maybe I don't look any different, but I sure feel different.

It's not for everybody. It's a silent, undirected retreat. Very quiet place. That's how I recharge my batteries, come face to face with myself. My wife Chris would go insane in a place like that (no talking), but I love it.

The Trappists came to Gethsemani in 1848. Not the ones who are there now, of course, although some of them look like they could have been part of the original group. Two monks were born to eternal life this year. Three Novices and four Postulants have joined the community. The world keeps turning, and the monks keep making cheese and fruitcake, and they keep singing

MOVE

Our readings today begin with a promise. If you look at the part of Isaiah that comes before today's reading, you'll see that King Ahaz has a little problem. Some other kings are allied against him. He thinks he's got the solution all worked out on his own – he'll make a deal with his enemies to keep from being conquered. He's got it all figured out. But God has other plans.

Isaiah tells Ahaz to remain calm – easy for Isaiah to say, when his enemies were bearing down on him, right? Isaiah tells him to trust in the Lord, and even suggests that he ask God for a sign.

Ahaz won't do it. He's got his own plans. He's got it all worked out. He's all set to make a deal, and he's not interested in what God wants him to do. He doesn't even want to know what God has in mind.

But he doesn't get off that easy. He gets a sign, whether he wants it or not – a prophecy that God will save Israel. A young girl will be found already with child. She will give birth and give the child a name which means "God is with us,"

Emmanuel. This child will continue the line of descent from David, and ensure that the kingdom will not fall to the invaders.

Ahaz refused to accept the sign. The king he trusted to protect him, the king he was going to make the deal with, conquered him instead. Ahaz trusted in his own power, and it failed him. But the prophecy was fulfilled anyway. The line of David continued.

MOVE

We're about to start a new year. It seems like this time of the year, we become more acutely aware of the passage of time. It gets dark so early in the evening, and stays dark late in the morning. At the monastery, it was still dark at breakfast and already dark at supper.

But we know that the light will come. Yesterday was the Winter Solstice, the shortest day – and the longest night – of the year. From here on out, it'll be brighter.

We don't really know the date of the birth of Jesus, of course – but it seems appropriate to me that we celebrate it at this time of the year. At the time of the year when our world is darkest, we celebrate the coming of the light into our world.

The old year ends, another year begins. The past is fading away – thanks be to God – the future is upon us. Like the sign given to Ahaz, it doesn't matter whether we want it or not. It's time to think about the future, about our dreams, about our hopes – about fulfillment.

MOVE

Sometimes we get a sign, whether we want it or not. It sure happened to Joseph.

Joseph had a difficult choice. Matthew tells us that Joseph was a righteous man. All his life, Joseph probably saw righteousness in terms of obedience to the letter of the law. He *knew* what was right and wrong based on the law.

But now, something happens that he's not prepared to deal with. I've often thought of this reading in terms of Mary saying something like . . . “Honey, we need to talk.” Uh oh. You *guys* know how *that* feels.

Joseph's world takes a sudden turn he wasn't expecting at all. He's got to change his way of thinking from obedience to the law to obedience to God – no matter what the law says.

King Ahaz was closed to the Lord. His mind was made up. He had his own plans, and nothing, not even God, was going to change them.

Joseph was open. He heard the voice of the Lord in his dreams. He had his own plans, like all of us – but they changed. He knew that he had to submit to a higher authority.

MOVE

What do we do when our plans change? Do we take matters into our own hands and make our own decision? Or do we trust in the Lord? Sometimes, I just might be preaching to myself more than I'm preaching to y'all.

A lot of us are stubborn enough to ride a bad decision down in flames, even when we know it's a bad decision.

Colin Powell wrote a set of "Rules for Living," phrased in military terminology. One of them is

"Never have your position so close to your ego that when your position falls, your ego falls with it."

That's pretty good advice.

MOVE

As people of faith, we are called upon to trust in the Lord, even when we have no guarantees, even when we've got our own ideas.

Does God speak to us in our dreams? Maybe not in words, but I suppose we've all had the experience of going to bed worried or burdened about something – but then, sometimes, we awake with a clarity and sense of hope and peace that we couldn't find in the darkness of night. Maybe we're so bound up in our own search for solutions when we're awake that we can't hear God's solutions. When we're awake, we're so busy telling God what *we* feel, what *we* want, etc. – Lord, gimme

gimme gimme – that we can't hear His answer. Sometimes I think He waits for us to go to sleep so we'll shut up and listen for a change.

When Joseph was awake, he was in the grip of anxiety. Awake, all he could think about was “*his*” problem, and “*his*” own solution to it. Asleep, he got the sign he didn't even ask for – God's solution to his problem.

It worked out pretty well for Joseph – and for all of us, don't you think?

The sign, the redemption, is for all of us. But it's also for each of us individually, personally. We need to listen and watch for the sign.

MOVE

I usually preach on the 4th Sunday of Advent every year, and I usually say this – if I don't, I mean to. One of my favorite quotes is “Christmas is a holiday that persecutes the lonely, the frayed, the rejected.”

Jimmy Cannon said that. I think he was on to something there – “Christmas is a holiday that persecutes the lonely, the frayed, the rejected.” It gets dark so early, the nights are so long . . . more people feel lost, disconnected, isolated, out of place, out of time, than at any other time of the year. For a lot of people, Christmas is more Gethsemani than Bethlehem.

Christmas is a good time to renew family ties. It's a time to mend fences, bury old grudges, bind up old wounds – ask for forgiveness – grant forgiveness – renew broken relationships.

So Advent might be a good time for us to put aside our own hopes, desires, ambitions – and watch for the sign, listen for the sign. The message may be very quiet – just a tiny whispering sound – but we might hear it, if we listen.

READINGS

Reading I

Is 7:10-14

The LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying:
Ask for a sign from the LORD, your God;
let it be deep as the netherworld, or high as the sky!
But Ahaz answered,
"I will not ask! I will not tempt the LORD!"
Then Isaiah said:
Listen, O house of David!
Is it not enough for you to weary people,
must you also weary my God?
Therefore the LORD himself will give you this sign:
the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son,
and shall name him Emmanuel.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 24:1-2, 3-4, 5-6

R (7c and 10b) **Let the Lord enter; he is king of glory.**

The LORD's are the earth and its fullness;
the world and those who dwell in it.
For he founded it upon the seas
and established it upon the rivers.

R. **Let the Lord enter; he is king of glory.**

Who can ascend the mountain of the LORD?
or who may stand in his holy place?

One whose hands are sinless, whose heart is clean,
who desires not what is vain.

R. **Let the Lord enter; he is king of glory.**

He shall receive a blessing from the LORD,
a reward from God his savior.

Such is the race that seeks for him,
that seeks the face of the God of Jacob.

R. **Let the Lord enter; he is king of glory.**

Reading II

Rom 1:1-7

Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus,
called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God,
which he promised previously through his prophets in the holy Scriptures,

the gospel about his Son, descended from David according to the flesh,
but established as Son of God in power
according to the Spirit of holiness
through resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.
Through him we have received the grace of apostleship,
to bring about the obedience of faith,
for the sake of his name, among all the Gentiles,
among whom are you also, who are called to belong to Jesus Christ;
to all the beloved of God in Rome, called to be holy.
Grace to you and peace from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Gospel

Mt 1:18-24

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about.
When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph,
but before they lived together,
she was found with child through the Holy Spirit.
Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man,
yet unwilling to expose her to shame,
decided to divorce her quietly.
Such was his intention when, behold,
the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said,
"Joseph, son of David,
do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home.
For it is through the Holy Spirit
that this child has been conceived in her.
She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus,
because he will save his people from their sins."
All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:
Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,
which means "God is with us."
When Joseph awoke,
he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him
and took his wife into his home.