

4th SUNDAY IN ADVENT (Cycle A)

December 18, 2011 -- Deacon Bill Nourse, Ed.D.

Well, there's a hill in Ireland. It's at a place called Newgrange, near the river Boyne. I've never been there myself, but I've read a lot about it.

In the side of the hill there's a passageway about sixty feet long that leads into the center of the hill, where there's a chamber that's shaped like a cross. It's kind of like the Cathedral with its two transepts off the sides of the center aisle.

The structure at Newgrange is called a passage grave. But there's no evidence that anyone was ever buried there, or that it was even intended to be a grave. It was built over 5,000 years ago. Before Stonehenge, before the Pyramids of Giza. It was sealed up for thousands of years until people began studying it in the seventeenth century.

Above the entrance to the passageway there is a rectangular opening. One day a year, on the morning of the Winter Solstice – December 22, next week – the rising sun shines straight down the passageway and floods the inner chamber with light. On that one day, the sun lights the chamber for about 17 minutes.

No one knows who built it, or why. No one knows why they chose the shape of a cross for the inner chamber. But on that one day a year, a few days before Christmas, the light of the rising sun illuminates the chamber.

These must have been some deep people, to figure all this out and build the structure at Newgrange over 5,000 years ago.

The night before the Winter Solstice is the longest night of the 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 so late in the morning.

But we know that the light will come. As the rising sun shines on Newgrange, we know that from here on out, our world will be a little brighter.

It's always seemed appropriate to me that we celebrate Christmas 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. It's time to think about the future, about our dreams, about our hopes – about fulfillment.

For long periods of Israel's history, the Chosen People believed that God would fulfill his promise to David of a dynasty that would last forever – and how He would be father and savior to His people. As the centuries wore on, this must have seemed increasingly mysterious.

And when Mary consented to become the mother of the Messiah, He makes good his promise.

God saves. David wanted to do something for the Lord – build Him a house. But he never got to do it. He had not understood that it is always God who does-for-us, not we who do-for-God. It is we who are needy. God has no needs. He needs nothing we have, we cannot do Him any favors, even if in our moments of self-important generosity we tend

to think of ourselves as doing just that. We can serve Him, of course. But He doesn't need us. We need Him.

He takes care of teaching us this. Our salvation is always His initiative, always totally gratuitous, and always surpasses human understanding. Salvation does not come from man, does not come from our own efforts. Unless the Lord builds the house, those who labor labor in vain.

So nine months before the first Christmas, God alone is responsible for approaching a specific young woman. She is unknown outside of her obscure village. She has earned nothing from God, yet He showers her with unmerited favors, proposes a plan to her, and makes it all contingent upon her freely given consent.

The Fathers of the Church liked to picture all of humankind holding their breath, hanging on her answer, begging her to consent. She was just a young girl, probably a teenager. She may have believed that God wanted her to remain a virgin, even in marriage. She lived in a backwater town in the middle of nowhere, on the fringe of the Empire. She couldn't possibly have grasped the idea of three divine Persons; Gabriel's explanation that the "Holy Spirit" would come upon her probably made it all even more confusing.

But she places her unlimited trust in the will of God. She doesn't ask a lot of questions. She doesn't demand a lot of explanations. She doesn't insist that she has to "understand." She accepts that God's ways are beyond anything she is capable of understanding, beyond anything we are capable of understanding. She may have had her own plans, but she knew that they must be adjusted to fit God's plan. This is a pivotal moment in her life.

So she consents, without knowing or understanding what the full consequences will be. It is the high point of history. This little girl did more for us than all the other great luminaries of history combined.

I hope we all understand that what we do to make Christmas special is nothing compared with what God has done. The Incarnation is His work, not ours. It is His coming, our salvation. If we focus mainly on the trivialities that we and our families and friends provide, then we have missed the point of Christmas. If we focus on what it's really all about, we might be able to approach it all with the deep sense of need and of anticipation and be able to enter into a genuine, personal encounter with him. If we can be prepared to put aside our own plans, if it seems God wants something else – even if we don't fully understand or it doesn't make sense to us – we might just be able to share in the big plan for all of history, and the little plan for us, here, today.

Mary didn't have to consent. Some might say that God has a "bad habit" of respecting the free will that he gave us. He invites us. He doesn't require us. It's all up to us to accept or not, to let Him in or not, to build him a house in our hearts, or not.

The deacons usually preach on the 4th Sunday of Advent every year. There's something I try to remember to say every year. So if you've heard it before, bear with me and hear it again.

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, out of options, than at any other time of the year. There’s more depression, more suicide, more domestic violence around Christmas than at any other time of the year. For a lot of people, Christmas is more Gethsemani than Bethlehem.

There are some in our community for whom the grace of the presence of Christ has special meaning: the sick, the lonely, the dying, the alienated, the rejected, those who see themselves as rejected – those who are separated from society by a veil of some kind.

I know, I know . . . it’s hard to visit them because we don't know what to say. Jesus tells us that we don't have to say anything. Our presence speaks more eloquently than words.

Christmas is a good time to renew family ties. It’s a good time to reach out to people, to mend fences, to bury old grudges, to bind up old wounds – to ask for forgiveness – to offer forgiveness – to renew broken relationships. That’s one of many ways to prepare not only for Christmas but also for Christ's Second Coming.

This might be a good time for us to put aside our own hopes, desires, ambitions – and listen. We might hear it, if we listen.

READINGS

Reading 1

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

When King David was settled in his palace,
and the LORD had given him rest from his enemies on every side,
he said to Nathan the prophet,
“Here I am living in a house of cedar,
while the ark of God dwells in a tent!”
Nathan answered the king,
“Go, do whatever you have in mind,
for the LORD is with you.”
But that night the LORD spoke to Nathan and said:
“Go, tell my servant David, ‘Thus says the LORD:
Should you build me a house to dwell in?’

“It was I who took you from the pasture
and from the care of the flock
to be commander of my people Israel.
I have been with you wherever you went,
and I have destroyed all your enemies before you.
And I will make you famous like the great ones of the earth.
I will fix a place for my people Israel;
I will plant them so that they may dwell in their place
without further disturbance.
Neither shall the wicked continue to afflict them as they did of old,
since the time I first appointed judges over my people Israel.
I will give you rest from all your enemies.
The LORD also reveals to you
that he will establish a house for you.
And when your time comes and you rest with your ancestors,
I will raise up your heir after you, sprung from your loins,
and I will make his kingdom firm.
I will be a father to him,
and he shall be a son to me.
Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before me;
your throne shall stand firm forever.”

Responsorial Psalm

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

R. (2a) For ever I will sing the goodness of the Lord.

The promises of the LORD I will sing forever;
through all generations my mouth shall proclaim your faithfulness.
For you have said, “My kindness is established forever”;
in heaven you have confirmed your faithfulness.

R. For ever I will sing the goodness of the Lord.

“I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
I have sworn to David my servant:
Forever will I confirm your posterity
and establish your throne for all generations.”

R. For ever I will sing the goodness of the Lord.

“He shall say of me, ‘You are my father,

my God, the Rock, my savior.’
Forever I will maintain my kindness toward him,
and my covenant with him stands firm.”

R. For ever I will sing the goodness of the Lord.

Reading II

Rom 16:25-27

Brothers and sisters:

To him who can strengthen you,
according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ,
according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret for long ages
but now manifested through the prophetic writings and,
according to the command of the eternal God,
made known to all nations to bring about the obedience of faith,
to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ
be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Gospel

Lk 1:26-38

The angel Gabriel was sent from God
to a town of Galilee called Nazareth,
to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph,
of the house of David,
and the virgin’s name was Mary.
And coming to her, he said,
“Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you.”
But she was greatly troubled at what was said
and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.
Then the angel said to her,
“Do not be afraid, Mary,
for you have found favor with God.

“Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son,
and you shall name him Jesus.
He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High,
and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father,
and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever,
and of his kingdom there will be no end.”
But Mary said to the angel,
“How can this be,
since I have no relations with a man?”
And the angel said to her in reply,
“The Holy Spirit will come upon you,
and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.
Therefore the child to be born
will be called holy, the Son of God.
And behold, Elizabeth, your relative,
has also conceived a son in her old age,
and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren;
for nothing will be impossible for God.”
Mary said, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.
May it be done to me according to your word.”
Then the angel departed from her.