

Homily for Gaudete Sunday

December 14, 2018

What do we have to be joyful about? The world is in shambles:

our world is warming at an alarming rate, destroying species rapidly;
there are protests in the streets of France, instability of governments everywhere;
civil warfare is driving unprecedented number of refugees to seek asylum;
Americans' insatiable thirst for drugs is driving gang warfare in the world.
Our country is the only nation not to sign the minimalist accord on climate control;
Our country is plagued by rigged elections;
Our church has lost credibility with the revelations of sexual abuse and coverups.
Each of us has our family tragedies; you can add your own disease plaguing us and our world.

Perhaps we are looking in the wrong places.

Our Readings give us a clue about where to look.

Zephaniah prophesied when Judah was governed by Assyria and the Jews had turned to a practical atheism—the idolatrous cult of the pagan god Baal, the worship of the sun, moon, and stars. They had forgotten their God in their own Temple, the God who summoned them to ethical care for one another. After proclaiming God's judgment on them the prophet calls them to the presence of their God in their midst: "Shout for joy, O daughter Zion; sing joyfully, O Israel! The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty savior; he will rejoice over you with gladness." No matter how dark the days, their God is there to save.

St. Luke tells us how God has drawn near: John the Baptist prepares the way of the Lord by telling the people to live ethically, sharing their goods and not abusing their power by shaking others down. But, when others begin to think of him as the Messiah, he is clear: Jesus is the mighty one who is coming. Luke later shows that this Jesus is the Son of God in their midst. As the risen Christ, he will save people by pouring out his Holy Spirit in their baptism, fulfilling the prophecy of Ezekiel.

That is why St. Paul can exhort his disciples, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, Rejoice! The Lord is near." Paul thought that the Lord's second coming would be in his lifetime, but he also knew that the Lord was near to him as he was writing. The Lord is not just coming at the end; he is present to the members of his Body in their darkest days and times.

What does this mean for us, this Advent?

First, God is present to us in Jesus the Christ. He is present in this Eucharist---in the Bread and the Wine, in the priest, in the readings, in each of you gathered here. And Jesus is present after the Eucharist is finished, as you go out to dinner, as you confront the problems in your family, as you make up your mind to be more active politically, as you take action to make this parish a more visible sign of God's presence in Bremerton.

But, second, Jesus is not fully present in us; he is unformed in all of us. We are pregnant with Jesus, as He was present to Mary while still in the womb. St. Paul has a marvelous description of our pregnancy with God: "...all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now; and...we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, we also groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies." (Rom 8:22-23) That, of course, is the meaning of advent, a period of pregnancy as we await the total rebirth of God in our world,.

Third, how do we make ourselves more aware of that Jesus coming to rebirth in us, in the midst of the pains of our world? We have to take time each day to be attuned to God's talking to us. Our prayer is not about our talking to God; it is more about our listening to what God is saying to us. He speaks to us especially when we when we read the gospels and epistles of St. Paul. And if we listen attentively enough, we will hear the groaning of our children, of our Church, of our world awaiting their redemption in Christ.

Finally, John the Baptist tell as us how to clean up our act so that we can hear Jesus talking to us. It is radical sharing: "Whoever has two coats should share with the one who has none. Whoever has food should do likewise." In our consumerist culture our souls are cluttered with things we do not need, while others lack what they need. As we look around, we see everywhere storage lockers, storing items our family will never uses. Our closets and dressers are full of clothes we will never wear. In giving some of that to Goodwill of St. Vincent de Paul. we might clear a place for Jesus to come into us so that we might give him birth in our world.

This would make an advent which would lead to a very merry Christmas.