

Church of the Good Shepherd
and
St. John the Evangelist

4th Advent
December 19, 2004
Fr. Bill McGinty

“Whoever has a heart full of love, always has something to give”

Christmas is the season of giving. How often have we heard and read those words? We have grown up with them. We cherish them. We teach them to our children.

There is a jingle in the air this week; it is the jingle of cash registers opening and closing as we all go to purchase those precious Christmas gifts that tell our loved ones that we do indeed cherish and love them, and there is nothing wrong with that. However, one of the greatest men of the twentieth century once said, “Whoever has a heart full of love, always has something to give.”

What a great message that would be for Christmas. Imagine if our friends came up to us this week and told us, “I’m not buying you a gift this Christmas, but I want to tell you I love you; and in the coming year I intend to love you a whole lot more.”

Throughout the Advent season we have been exposed to readings from the prophets of the Old Testament, St Paul and the gospel stories of John the Baptist and the events leading up to the birth of Jesus. While these readings may speak of Messiahship and successor to David and a new Jerusalem, they are really about God’s love; God’s love for us. In Isaiah 48:16 God tells the people of Israel: “Come close to me and hear what I say. The Holy God of Israel the Lord who saves you says: I am the Lord your God, the one who wants to teach you for your own good and direct you in the way you should go.”

If there are two things we are often slow to grasp or slow to do, it is listening to the voice of God speaking to us in our lives, and secondly, it is learning from the lessons that he teaches us.

In Advent God speaks loudly. The evergreen of the Advent wreath says to us, “I am your God and I am forever. The flame of the candle tells us, “at Baptism I consecrated you to me and light a flame of faith within you. I did not go away. I did not abandon you. My spirit has been with you each and every moment of every day. In my sacrament I renew myself in you and in this season I remind you that I am your God who loves you and sent his only Son to you that you might know and love me.”

Advent tells us that Jesus is coming. In our Christian faith this is not just an anniversary of Jesus’ birth. It is much more than that. In our Christian theology Jesus is spiritually reborn every year. It is our paschal mystery, our living Gospel, whereby we in our generation live out the life and events of Jesus’ life and unite ourselves to him as his disciples, and friends, and, yes, as the “Body of Christ.”

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In a few days time we will gather for our Christmas Eucharist, and it is there that we will hear again the words of Isaiah the Prophet, “The people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light, and to those who have walked in the shadow of the Valley of Death, a new light has dawned.”

That is the message of Advent, that no matter what has happened in our lives up to this moment, Jesus is coming, he is the light and he will change everything. Sickness, imprisonment, unemployment, poverty, divorce or even the death of our loved one, Advent tells us, it does not matter Jesus is coming. He is our Salvation.

As Isaiah says, the Lord will say to his people, “When the time comes to save you, I will show you favor and answer your cries for help. I will guard and protect you and through you make a covenant with all the peoples. I will let you settle once again in your land that is now laid waste.”

I will say to prisoners, “Go free, and to those who are in darkness, come out to the light. They will be like sheep that graze on the hills; they will never be hungry or thirsty. Sun and desert heat will not hurt them, for they will be led by one who loves them. He will lead them to spring waters.”

In the next year we as a people and as a church must listen to God more closely. Constantly, he answers our call for help. Time upon time he supplies our physical needs. As a church we seem to be blind to this, as if it is our efforts, and our efforts only, that meet the needs of this church and its people. We could not be more wrong. This church and the gospel were here a long time before we ever got here and they will be here a long time after we have gone. Several things conspired to convince me of this in the last week.

The first was a telephone call I received of Wednesday at 8:30 p.m. The lady on the cell phone said, “Father McGinty, if you go down to the church you will find thirty something sleeping bags for children and ten brand new bicycles in your church. They are for your Friday Food Pantry Gift Day.” “Thank you I said, “But who are you? Can I have your name?” “No” she said, “We are just Christian friends of the church.” As I arrived at church Friday night, the line to the Food Pantry snaked around the building. Christmas was in the air as people left the church with wrapped gifts for their needy children.

I went to the office and opened the mail. The first letter was from our dear friend Dennis Smith in Maine, He wrote that he was so glad that Maryann and I had returned to Good Shepherd. Now he was happy that God had placed the church in good hands. He asked to be remembered to all of you and that you remember and commemorate his dear partner John in church. He asked that this be done through a donation to the Good Shepherd music program and he included a check for \$5000.00.

Moments later I spoke to members of the Organ Committee who told me that the organ they dreamed about had just been quoted at \$50,000 dollars less than they had expected. It was almost a round figure except for five thousand dollars. We thought God was trying to tell us something. In Advent God speaks loudly.

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God is surely telling us that he has a plan. He has a plan for this church. It is not our plan; it is his plan. It is not our agenda; it is his agenda. It is not our son who came to earth; it is his Son. It is Jesus' salvation that is on offer and we had better listen. "For no one can mess with the Holy Spirit" Jesus tells his disciples in the gospel.

"The Spirit will blow where he will." Well the Spirit is blowing through this church. He is rattling our windows with intent. And he is saying to us, "Wake up my people. Wake up give a shout. Wake up my people and know what life's about and wake up to the needs of all the ones who suffer sorrow; wake up my people."

You cannot give anything to God that he won't give right back to you tenfold. That is the history of God's church. That is the recent history of this church. Five weeks ago we asked you for \$54,000 in our annual pledge drive. To date you have given us \$57,000 in the first 34 pledges. God bless you! And God will bless you. You cannot give to God that he will not give back to you tenfold in this life, and in the eternal life to come.

Two years ago you were told you belong to a dying parish that could not survive. You do not look dying to me. To me you look wonderful. To me you look alive, vibrant, happy and growing day by day, in God's life and in his grace.

No one can tell Katherine Ruzanski that she belongs to a dying parish. Katherine Ruzanski is unsinkable and she has a friend called Jesus. You could not knock Jane Herrington down with a small tank, never mind get her to belong to a dying parish. Jane Herrington has a friend and his name is Jesus. In good weather and bad weather storm, blizzard or earthquake, Eileen Galka is going to be in this church. You could not stop her. She is a Brit. They are like that. She has a friend. His name is Jesus.

This parish can never die because this parish belongs to Jesus. Jesus dwells here. Jesus walks here. Jesus plays with the children here. Jesus saves here.

This Friday night you are invited to a party. It is a birthday party for a friend, a savior, the King of Kings. You are invited to come, give thanks, and rejoice that Gods son has come into this world.

Then go home and celebrate Christmas. Then tell your loved ones you love them, for your heart will be full of love. A love placed there by the Child of Bethlehem whose coming tells us, "Whoever has a heart full of love always has something to give."

Amen +

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