

Church of the Good Shepherd
and
St. John the Evangelist

2nd Advent
December 5, 2004
Fr. Bill McGinty

“Come Lord Jesus”

Jacob was a shepherd who had disappointed his parents. As a boy he had been sent to the Synagogue to learn Hebrew and begin his studies to be a Rabbi. He was sent home. The family felt the disgrace of failure. They said he had no focus and he was a dreamer. From that day on Jacob spent his time in the hills looking after the sheep and goats. He remembered well his fathers parting words:

“You have brought shame on this family. Your name will never be mentioned in my presence again. A worthless shepherd will be your lot. May you perish and be forgotten, I have no son named Jacob!”

Life in the hills of Judah was harsh and unforgiving. Summers were hot, winters cold and bitter. There was little shelter. In the summer Jacob camped by the streams in the valleys. The winter drove him into the caves, where a fire and the animals kept him warm. Shepherds from many towns grouped together for protection and companionship.

The years rolled by. He watched the seasons unfold and holidays come and go. From high above, he could see the caravan routes and the great road that linked Jerusalem to Bethlehem and disappeared far across the desert towards Egypt. He watched the travelers come and go. He learnt of the events of the world from passing pilgrims and those who journeyed to Jerusalem. The Romans came. He watched the slow tramp of the legends along the Great Road. Wars and revolts lit the skyline with their fires; he watched the black smoke that spoke of death, violence and destruction.

In time he married and the children came; seven in all. They followed the ways of the shepherds, learning at the feet of their parents. They grew in wisdom of the scriptures and the prophets, going up to the Temple in Jerusalem from time to time.

As he grew older Jacob pondered the meaning of the words he now read. He felt that the time was coming when the Messiah would appear. He looked around and saw the signs of the times. Persecution! Fear! Suffering! An evil ruler! Just as it had been in Moses' day. He wanted something better for his children. He saw the hunger in the eyes of his children for justice and understanding; peace and reconciliation. Night after night he sat staring at the stars, watching the changing sky, he saw the stars align. In the hills the animals seem to know that something was about to happen. Till the night, the star appeared in the East. Night after night the children tracked it across the desert sky. They were excited. “What is it Father?” they exclaimed. “It is the Messiah? Is it the Son of David? Will God send us a Savior?” Their eyes glittered and spoke of hope and expectation.

One night around the campfire they listened silently as their mother, Miriam, spoke. She did not speak often, but when she spoke all listened and listened carefully. “My children,” She said, “our God is a kind and loving God, who wants to demonstrate that love to us. In

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each new birth he shows us the wonder of his creation. It is my belief that we are in the last days of prophecy. We are at the dawn of the Age of the Messiah. God is about to visit his people. When the flowers come and spring is near we know that the lambs will soon appear. So, too, the signs that we have seen point to the coming of our long awaited Messiah.” “With all my heart I believe he will not be a mighty King or a feared General, for our Father Isaiah speaks with great gentleness of one who will come, who suffers amid suffering, who brings peace amid war, who heals amid disease and brokenness.”

“Children, look for a child not born rich, but poor. Not amid royalty, but in humble surroundings. God will maybe choose to come as one of us, a shepherd to care for his sheep.” From that night, they waited, Jacob, Miriam, and the seven children, searching the stars, hoping against hope that the bright star would come their way. They waited, watching their sheep and praying: “Come, Come Emmanuel.”

Jacob’s story is the heart of the story of Advent. Advent is a time of waiting. Waiting is not something we like to do too much of in our lives. We don’t like to wait in line. We hate to wait for a plumber, and we are frustrated if we have a long wait to get on line. Waiting is not our thing. Advent allows us to wait with a purpose. In Advent more than any other season our God chooses to speak to us. How often do we hear those words “God is speaking to us?” Maybe we are tempted to say: “but I can’t hear him.” And maybe that is because we have not listened. Today, the second Sunday of Advent, 2004, God spoke to each one of us.

The readings of Advent speak directly of Messiahship and the coming of the Savior. Isaiah tells us “a shoot shall come from the stump of Jesse.” Jesse was the Father of David who became a great King of Israel. It is from the House of David that the Messiah would come. Isaiah speaks of the coming of Man of Wisdom who is filled with God’s Spirit; “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the kid with the lion!” What is the prophet saying? It is that the coming of the Christ will bring a return to God’s creation before the fall of man. Before sin entered the world, when the Messiah comes he will restore the proper order, no longer will wealth, power and evil rule, but goodness and rightness.

If such a teaching was applicable just before the birth of Jesus, how much more so is it today in our world, where bigger is better and where what is right is what we say is right. This week I read two newspaper articles that best illustrate this point. The first was an article that claimed that New Jersey has moved into first place for the number of SUV’s in the state. Now one car in every six is an SUV. This, despite the fact that gas prices have gone up and the world is suffering climate change because of global warming.

The second article reported that they are trying to pass a law in Holland to allow doctors in Dutch hospitals to perform euthanasia on babies and on infants without the consent of their parents. The child would be given a shot that would freeze all muscles including the heart if doctors deemed he or she was a) in great pain, b) was terminal or c) was handicapped. On being quizzed by reporters one young doctor replied: “we have already been doing this for the last three years. We just don’t tell the parents. We tell them their

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child died of natural causes and they thank us for our efforts on behalf of their child. We only want to make legal what we are doing already.”

When did being in pain or being handicapped become an offense? Allow this and we are on a very slippery slope. Where would it end? Will there come a day doctors or relatives can terminate Grandma because she is passed seventy-five and has no Medicare? Would a shot be cheaper than a nursing home? Doctors scare me. I live next door to a lady who is 90 and is fitter, and more active than I am.

Between 1981 and 1992, I took handicapped children to France for an annual vacation. James was twelve, but he had a mental age of six. He was a down-syndrome child. James was a talker. He would talk to everyone. He dressed, bathed, and put himself to bed. He could shop and do most things. He was loving and kind and could give more love in a day that most of us experience in a year.

James is a child of God, innocent and good. Can some doctor decide that his life is of a lesser quality and really he should have been terminated shortly after birth? People like James teach us something about unconditional love. They teach us that we should be and could be just as honest, just as caring, and just as trusting. Jesus came for James. The lesson from Isaiah tells us so. He is a child of God. Isaiah's words promise that when the Messiah comes his teaching will protect James.

How often have you heard me say, “We Christians are at war.” Yes, we are and it's a war that we must not lose. We are at war against the morality of convenience that would destroy God's creation, Jesus' teaching and God's children with a shot from a doctor's needle.

But it could never happen here, I hear you say. It could never happen in America, the land of the free, the home of the brave. In America we have values, American values and we will fight to defend them. Well we had better, because what happens in Holland yesterday can happen here tomorrow.

Abortion passed in the UK in 1967. Roe vs. Wade passed here in 1973. Doctor Kevorkian is not a distant memory. Where do we draw the line in the sand and say: “No further will we accept drugs in sports,” and preach “no drugs” to our children in the classroom?

Advent is a season of prophecy. Prophets are dangerous people because they always tell the truth. The truth can hurt. It can stop us in our tracks. It asks questions like where do you stand? Where is your line in the sand? What will you fight for? The child of Bethlehem is a symbol as powerful today as at any time in history. Advent reminds us of that fact.

Today's Gospel from Matthew, Chapter 3, sees the appearance of John the Baptist as the Herald of the Messiah, a voice of one crying in the wilderness: “make straight the way of the Lord.”

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John comes at the end of a long line of prophets. He cares nothing for wealth, position or power. He calls for the people to repent! "Repent!" What does it mean? It means to stop, to turn back, to sin no more, to return to God's law. People want to repent. They want to be forgiven. They need to feel clean and whole again.

In 1985 in England, Catholic Bishops allowed General Absolution during the season of Lent. Catholics normally confess their sins face to face with their priest in a confessional. General Absolution allows them to attend a service and receive forgiveness in a large group without confessing out loud.

For those services, the churches were packed with people standing around the walls and in the doorways. People who had not confessed or been to church in twenty years turned up. They received God's forgiveness and went home.

At the end of Lent the Vatican sent a letter to all dioceses to say General Absolutions was invalid and would no longer be allowed, only private confession would be allowed. An audible groan arose from the Catholic community as if someone had just placed a large weight back on their shoulders.

Forgiveness is the right of every Christian. It flows from Jesus' cross like a mountain stream. It is unconditional. It is free. It is won. It gives grace.

From time to time we all need repentance. We all need to be set free from sin. We all need to be born anew. Christ has done that for us. Here in this liturgy we have forgiveness and General Absolution after the prayers of confession. That is what Jesus has won for us. John proclaims that forgiveness in today's reading.

Jesus gift is free. Advent calls us to respond and to respond with all that we are to the power and majesty of God that has entered our lives. Like the shepherds in our story we know that change is coming. We, too, can read the signs of the times. The coming of this child in 2004 is as important to us as anything in our lives. We pray he brings wisdom and peace.

As we look at our Advent wreath today we wait and pray that Christ will come and strengthen our values, that he will come and bring forgiveness. We pray that he will come and lead us in fighting the good fight. "Come Lord Jesus."

Amen +

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