

Third Sunday of Advent

Thomas Gumbleton | Dec. 21, 2006 The Peace Pulpit

The message from today's readings, especially the first two readings, is very clear. God wants us to be joyful, to be filled with joy, and not a joy that's just a passing emotion that comes and goes in a few moments or so, but a joy that is deep, a joy that is lasting and that settles into our spirit. It might seem almost impossible that we could experience such joy, and yet if we listen to those lessons, it's clear that that is what God is telling us -- to be joyful.

If you remember the circumstances in which these words were proclaimed -- first by the prophet Zephaniah in a time when he must have been experiencing great frustration. He lived at the same time as the prophet Jeremiah and both of them were so aware of the corruption within the religious leadership and within the rulers of the Chosen People, and they could see calamity coming. No one would listen and so then the people were invaded, the Temple was destroyed, they were driven off into exile and it's in the midst of that exile, where everything seems lost, that Zephaniah says, "Cry out with joy, O daughter of Zion! Rejoice, O people of Israel! Sing joyfully with all your heart!"

Editor's note: This news story appeared on the NCR web site this week: [Bishop Gumbleton removed from Detroit parish](#) [1]

Then St. Paul also -- his circumstances were very desperate. At the time he was writing this letter to his community at Philippi, a community that he loved very much, Paul was in jail. If you've experience any jail situation, visited someone in jail, you know no jail is an easy place to be and certainly the dungeon, the kind of jail that Paul was in then, was harsh. The circumstances were very distressing, I'm sure -- almost overwhelming. And yet in the midst of that suffering, Paul said, "Rejoice in the Lord always! I say it again. Rejoice!" See, no matter what the circumstances, even terrible circumstances that you think would be just totally overwhelming, both Paul and Zephaniah are calling for a joyful spirit and they could not be asking others to be filled with joy if they did not themselves know joy in their hearts.

How is that possible then? Well, Zephaniah and Paul both remark on what is happening to them, "Do not be afraid nor let your hands tremble for Yahweh your God is within you. Yahweh is within you. God will jump for joy on seeing you for God has revived God's love." And Paul says the same thing, "Rejoice because the Lord is near, even in your hearts." This is what we need to deepen if we are going to be able to experience a joy that no one can take away from us. We need to deepen our awareness that God is with us, God is in our midst.

It's interesting that those words of Zephaniah are actually the words that Luke uses when it is announced to Mary that she is to be the mother of God. "Do not be afraid, Mary. The Lord is with you, in your midst." And the word is really the word for womb. God is deeply present within Mary. Zephaniah is saying God is deeply present within the people. Paul is saying God is near, God is always with us. So if we can have that experience -- come to know more deeply that God is with us, God is in us, God is in our midst -- nothing else, in a sense, will matter and we will know a deep sense of joyfulness.

What is the basis of the hope of a person like Baruch? I believe that it's probably a prayer-life -- a life of prayer where he, or anyone like this, would begin to try to remember all that God has already done. And this is especially true within the Jewish tradition. Their remembering of how God had delivered them from slavery, from oppression, brought them through the desert to the Promised Land, made them God's special people. That was an experience that was deeply imbedded in their spirit-life, in their minds and hearts. They would always remember that. "If God can act like that in the past, surely God can bring new life, even in the midst of our terrible situation."

St. Paul, in writing to the Philippians, has such powerful and great confidence. "The good work God has begun in you, God will bring to fulfillment." Why did Paul know that? Because even though he was in prison and had been treated harshly and kept in chains (the prison where he was was a dungeon -- it was very harsh), because Paul had experienced God coming upon him powerfully when he was first converted, he could always remember and with confidence say, "What God has begun, God will bring to completion."

We need to pray during the season of Advent that we can have that kind of a solid hope, remembering all the good that God has already brought into our lives and confident that God who has brought this goodness into our lives will bring it to completion, to fullness. So we have hope, or we pray that we will have hope, during this season of Advent that this new coming of Jesus will bring about change in our world, bring about the Reign of God in a fuller way than has been present before.

But we not only need to have hope that we learn from Paul and Baruch. We must also listen to John the Baptist, the one sent by God to prepare the way for Jesus. John comes into our midst proclaiming, "Yes, Jesus is coming! The Reign of God is about to break forth into our world." But we must begin to change our lives -- to live according to the ways of the Reign of God. And it's for this world, it's for this time, it's for now, not some future time in the afterlife. No, it's right now that Jesus asks us, "Change your lives." John says he's preaching for repentance to bring about the forgiveness of sins. What he means by that repentance is a change in our lives.

Next Sunday we'll be celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and we've prepared for that and will be preparing for that during this week. I'm sure that for many of us that means, as we begin to prepare for the sacrament, to think about individual sins we've committed and how we have to try to be better and so on. And then we think that our repentance is trying not to do those things again. Well it should be deeper than that -- not just a listing of sins. We should be looking deeply into our lives. How closely do we follow the way of Jesus in this world, at this time? Are we really open to being changed?

There are two values of Jesus that if we take them seriously will dramatically change our lives. And they're very challenging; it's very hard for us in the world in which we live to open ourselves to this kind of conversion. The first that I think of is because of the country in which we live -- page through your newspaper and see how

many pages of ads

When I reflect on these lessons, I think about the world in which we live. It's a world in which we, too, can become very discouraged and we can feel a sense of loss at times. Someone very close to us dies. Or if you think beyond yourself, in a sense, and think of what's going on in the world around us -- people in exile. Just the people in Iraq for example -- 1.6 million of them in internal exile. They've had to flee their homes, leaving everything behind. 1.8 million external exiles have fled the country. 1,000 flee every week. We must pray for them and keep them close in our hearts so that even in the midst of that terrible experience they can know that God is near so they can continue to know a deep sense of serenity, of peace, even joy.

This is a far cry, in a sense, from what is happening to people in Iraq or other parts of the world, but I also think of these lessons in terms of what is happening to us. We can't exactly call it an exile, but I'm being told I must leave here. That will happen quite soon really and many people have expressed to me great dismay, sadness, anger. Sometimes I feel those things myself and yet I must believe -- and I hope you will too -- and must come to know that God is near, God is in our midst, God is in our hearts, God is with us. And so even out of this God can bring something good, something better and we can continue to have a spirit of serenity and peace and joy even as this happens.

It won't automatically happen that we will have that deeper sense of God being present to us. That happens when we do as we have been trying to do during this season of Advent -- everyday spend those six minutes of prayer using the Blue Book or some other guide and enter into a prayerful spirit with God. If you've been doing that, I'm sure you have a deeper sense that God is present, God is with us, God is in us.

But then we also have to try to do what John the Baptist said when he said, "God is going to be near. Jesus is coming." The people asked, "What must we do?" He began to tell them, "Change your lives." Now he doesn't ask them to do it as dramatically and as drastically as Jesus does, but he's getting them ready for the call of Jesus to "change your lives dramatically." He tells those who have two coats -- more than you need -- "Give one away. You will be bringing God's goodness to another person. You will know God's goodness yourself, if you begin to be more generous." Live your life with a greater sense of integrity -- that's what John was telling the tax collectors. You know that that system meant that they could increase the tax any amount that they wanted -- they only had to give a certain amount to the authorities. John says, "No. Make your life honest. Only take the designated amount and then you, too, will know God being present to you." Even the soldiers. It's interesting that John didn't tell them to leave the military. Later on, Jesus doesn't tell them that immediately. "But don't bully anyone. Don't be threatening." In other words -- it seems a contradiction -- be a peaceful soldier. Bringing peace, not violence. Those are the kinds of things that we have to do in order to make God present to others and experience God's presence within ourselves.

In a few moments, we will be celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation and so this is a time when we can look into our hearts and try to discover how faithfully we are following Jesus. Maybe we haven't made the radical change in our life that Jesus seems to ask for when he tells us that we must leave everything and follow him, but at least we are making a step, step-by-step, and we can examine ourselves in this sacrament and God will bring healing to us -- another way that we will experience God being present to us. Through prayer, through our good works, through a sacrament like this Sacrament of Reconciliation, we will know deeply God is near, God is in our midst, God is within us and then we will know that deep sense of joy that no one can take from us.

Or if you put it into the words of Paul, "Then the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will fill your hearts and minds as you know Christ Jesus deeply in your heart." Each of us can leave here today with a spirit of joy, a spirit of peace, a spirit of hope that no one can take away from us.

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