NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Thomas Gumbleton | Jan. 4, 2007 The Peace Pulpit

As we are all aware, the Scripture lessons that we listen to every week are of course passages that have been written long, long ago. But they are also, as we know, the Word of God and that's always a living Word -- the Word that speaks to us within the context of our own lives, the context of the world in which we live. It's always amazing how current God's words can be. Today as we listen to those words, we obviously -- at least for me and I think for many of us -- listen to them within the context of what is happening within our parish community. So we must listen deeply and carefully to this Word of God today.

The first thing, it seems to me, is a Word from God that's very encouraging and it is from that passage from Micah. "You, Bethlehem, so small that you are hardly named among the clans of Judah, from you shall I raise the one who is to rule over Israel." That passage recalls what happened when God allowed the Chosen People to have a king for the first time. They had been demanding this over and over again because all the nations around them seemed to be powerful because they were led by powerful kings. Sometimes when we hear that passage and part of the reason it's in today's liturgy is that it points to Jesus and if we took it only as proof of a prophet predicting Jesus' coming that would be a mistake because it's much deeper than that.

See, this passage was proclaimed by Micah at a time when the Chosen People had tried to dominate others through powerful kings. The kings had become very rich and corrupt and the nation was being corrupted and so Micah was really reminding them of how it had all started. When he was proclaiming the Word it was in the 8th century before Christ, but it had started in the 11th century before Christ when they demanded this king, and at that point Samuel, who was a prophet in their midst, led the leaders to Bethlehem -- as proclaimed here -- the tiniest of towns in Judah, hardly known and then to choose the king he went to the family of Jesse. You may remember this.

Jesse had a number of sons and most of them were young men and were quite strong and vigorous, very physically capable, and Samuel kept rejecting every one of them. He said, "Isn't there another?" Well, there was -- David. But he was just a boy. He was out in the field, shepherding the sheep. Samuel said, "Bring him in," and then it was David, the youngest and, in a sense, the weakest, the most incapable from the perspective of people who looked upon children as not very capable or able to be a leader. "There's the one," Samuel said and he anointed David. All of this is to show that God works through those who are, in the world's eyes, sometimes little people. Or God works through those -- and anyone of us -- not through our power but the more we can become, in a sense, powerless before God, then God can work through us.

Now I reflect on this again in the context of what is happening to us. And it's happening to other parishes in the archdiocese [of Detroit] as you know. Somehow there seems to be a conviction among diocesan officials that a

small parish doesn't amount to very much -- that a small parish can easily be combined with other small parishes to become one big parish. The idea seems to be that you have to have a mega-church in order to be a powerful church, an effective church. But God tells us just the opposite. God works through smallness. God works through the poor. God works through those who, in the eyes of the world, don't seem to be very grand and glorious. God works through small people, small communities and that gives us confidence then that God has been and can continue to work through us. A small community certainly within the city of Detroit, but like other small communities, one that's vibrant, one that's alive, one that's formed deep bonds of love and faith among ourselves and a community that's ready to reach out and serve others. So surely it's a community that needs to continue to be here, continue to be ready to serve in our area, serve in our city, serve even beyond our nation's shores. We reach out, as you know, to Haiti. We reach out in other ways to other parts of the world and so God is telling us, I think, that even though we're small, we're important in God's eyes. I hope that will encourage all of us and give us the determination that we must continue to be here.

But then there's another way that the Scriptures speak to us today and for some of us this might be, not so much encouraging, as very challenging. It comes to us through the Gospel lesson. Luke is a very creative writer and here it is, the beginning of his Gospel, but he sets forth, in his description of this event of Mary visiting Elizabeth, he kind of alerts you to what's going to happen later on in the Gospel. Here is Mary traveling from Nazareth in Galilee and going down toward Judea and Jerusalem, carrying Jesus in her womb. Well, as you reflect on that, you realize Luke is reminding us of that final journey in Jesus' life. He's kind of anticipating when Jesus goes from Nazareth in Galilee down to Jerusalem to be handed over to his enemies, to be crucified and put to death. And so at the beginning of the Gospel, you're alerted to what's going to happen at the end of the Gospel.

Then in the incident about John the Baptist leaping in the womb of Elizabeth, that's a common motif in the Scriptures where a child leaps in a womb or moves within the womb, but it's a signal of something else that's going to happen. See, John is the first one, in this sense, to recognize Jesus coming to him in Mary. Well, as we know, later in the Gospel, John is the one who says, "There is the Lamb of God," and he points out Jesus. This is anticipating.

Then there's a third part of this Gospel that occurs later on. Elizabeth says to Mary, "Blessed are you among women and blessed are you because you are faithful to the Word that God has spoken to you. You have listened to God's Word and are following it in faith so you are blessed among all women, above all women because you are faithful to God's Word." Later in the Gospel of Luke, you find the incident that this one anticipates where Jesus is in a big crowd of people. He's teaching them. He's very occupied in his work of ministry -- of healing, of teaching, of preaching, and a woman on the edge of the crowd cries out about Mary, "Blessed is the womb who bore you. Blessed are the breasts that nursed you." She's giving praise to the mother of Jesus. But do you remember what Jesus says? He doesn't dispute that Mary is blessed, but he says, "No, blessed are those who hear the Word of God and keep it."

Mary's not special because she is a virgin mother, because she is the one who bore Jesus, the Son of God. Mary is special and is our model because she could hear the Word of God and follow it -- not knowing where it would take her. When the angel spoke to her, she said, "Be it done to me according to your word." Whatever would happen, Mary was ready to accept it, to continue to try to listen to God's Word and to be faithful to that Word. Well, at this moment in our life as a parish, we must listen deeply to God's Word and listen deeply to what is happening to us because God speaks to us not just through the written Word in the Bible -- God speaks to us through the events that happen in our life, God speaks to us through other people, God speaks to us in whole

variety of ways and we have to be listening, alert to hear what God is saying to us.

That means as we try to react to what is being told to us, decisions that are being made about us, we must try to listen to these events and try to hear God speaking within what is happening. Perhaps what God is asking of us is something we would rather not choose, but maybe it is the way that we become stronger, even more vibrant as a community of believing people. Maybe God is speaking to us to lead us in a different direction that will bring even greater blessings into our lives and enable us to bring greater blessings to the world around us. I hope that all of us can keep on trying to listen deeply -- not predetermine how we will respond.

There are different ways in which we can respond, but I hope that all of us will try to respond only by listening deeply to God's Word as it continues to be proclaimed to us through the Scriptures, as we talk with one another and listen to one another, as we try to discern God's Word in the events that are happening around us, decisions being made about us. We must try to listen deeply and ultimately follow where God leads us. I'm not trying to decide which way that should be. I know there are many who want to protest and act against what is being done -- and that may be the right thing to do -- but I simply ask us to listen deeply to what God is speaking to us.

Try to be like Mary, who could have no idea what her life would be like later on, when she said "yes" to God, but it turned out to be the most important thing in all of history, of course. When she said "yes," it meant that Jesus would come into the world -- the Son of God. You never know how God is going to work through any of us, how God will work through us individually or as a community so we must pray very deeply and by praying I mean trying to listen very deeply to God speaking and then try to follow the Word of God as Mary did. "Blessed are you among all women because you have heard God's Word and you followed it." Mary is the model disciple for all disciples. One who listened, is faithful, and followed. We must try to be disciples according to this same way of Mary.

Source URL (retrieved on *07/10/2014 - 17:57*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/peace-pulpit/fourth-sunday-advent