

Homily for the 2nd Sunday of Advent

December 8-9, 2018

Readings: Baruch 5:1-9; Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11; Luke 3:1-6

Preacher: Gloria Ulterino

It was another Advent, quite a few years ago now. But the words were the same: pulsing with joy, extravagant promises, and tender intimacy, yet all the while prodding the conscience. How is it possible to *preach* those words, to make them leap off the page into the heart? Hmmm? So it was that I “became” John the Baptist. Crying out, “Prepare the way of the Lord! Prepare the way of the Lord!” all the way down the center aisle, at reflection time. Complete with white beard, rough-hewn jacket and leather belt. It grabbed everyone’s attention!

But, then, of course, the words that follow must be *equally* alive. *Prepare* the way. Make ready. Clear the decks. Lay the foundation. Equip folks for action. As John robustly urges: “Repent! Turn and see in a whole new way what really matters!” Or, as Paul tenderly writes in gentler words to his beloved Philippians: I rejoice in your “partnership for the Gospel.”

Advent. Such a merciful time. And also, such a poking, pricking, challenging time. Yet almost swallowed up by the din of “Santa Claus is coming to town” in every mall. Even by the good intentions of writing cards ... baking everyone’s favorite cookies ... decorating “just so.” How is it possible to really slow down and hear the voice of genuine, true love? How is it possible to enter into the deeper meaning of this beautiful season?

Just a couple of weeks ago I was given a bit of an answer, out of the blue. It was at a large gathering, concluding with some lovely music by an Eastman School student quintet. The leader of the group made the most angelic sounds I think I’ve ever heard on the flute. It brought me to tears, and I simply *had* to speak with her. It turns out that she’s now a sophomore, and that her family originates in Guatemala. Her mother cleans houses to make ends meet. She had applied to the Eastman School a year and a half earlier and was accepted. But, how on earth could she afford the tuition? It was May 1, the deadline for making a

commitment. As it happened, that very same day, she was told that someone would be paying her tuition! “It was a miracle,” she proclaimed! Here she is, preparing for all the good that lies ahead, preparing out of her God-given gifts and the gifts of her benefactor. Her valley of profound need has been filled in.

Indeed, hers is an Advent story, of God’s ways coming to life through human flesh. But how does her story relate to community life? For the author of every reading is addressing a community. Perhaps a community like Baruch’s, which has lost the exuberance of having been brought home from exile. Are the people still worn down by the mountain of arrogance and narcissism of some leaders?

Are they discouraged by lies too easily told? Or the depths of promises unfulfilled? Or leaders who remain silent in the face of challenge? Or by the same old issues that never seem to be addressed? No! This cannot be! They must *remove* those garments of mourning, *take off* those garments of giving up, and clothe themselves instead with trust in God.

Or perhaps the community is more like the faith-filled community of Philippi—who has given heart and financial support to the imprisoned Paul. Keep it up, he urges them! I need your love to increase more and more, for one and for all! Or finally, the community addressed so robustly by John the Baptist. In a time and place different from ours, yet with a message for us all. Turn. Repent of mistakes. Hear the cries of people without hope. Hear the cries of mother earth. See in a whole new way. See the people, one at a time, in a caravan, only seeking enough to live on. See, hear, and respond!

Yes, it is Advent, with more than enough to take up our time. But, we cannot, we must not, ignore the pleas of all at our doorstep. As a community, how might we best respond, in this season of hope imagined and dreams unfulfilled? Can we promise ourselves, right now, to give out of the *true* spirit of the season? Can we promise others to meet early in the new year? To explore one or two ways that our community can clothe the grieving, mourning women and men of our day? To deepen one or two ways of becoming ever more engaged with the God of Jesus, like the Philippians? To whole-heartedly respond to John the Baptist. For he has grabbed our attention? How, then, can we respond to his energetic, challenging call?

