

Reflections on Sunday's Readings: December 16, 2018



'Rejoice, the Anointed One is near.'

Luke 4: 4-5

Third Sunday of Advent [C]

Zephaniah 3: 14-18a

Philippians 4: 4-7

Luke 3: 10-18

Introduction

This season of Advent offers us the opportunity to ponder "What kind of God do we believe in?" and "What is this God up to?" Another way of looking at this is to ask "What are God's dreams and hopes for us?"

As one contemporary spiritual writer offers 'much of our recent imagination about God in the West has been influenced by the writing of Dante' who wrote about purgatory, hell, and heaven, in vivid details. With these writings come the image of God as one caught up in the judgement of the human family and creation.

This judging image of God was also encouraged by our more mechanistic or black-and-white outlook on the world for many years as a human family.

Deeper Images in our Catholic-Christian Tradition

But there are other images of God and God's plans that are deeper in our tradition, and these are coming back to the fore especially in light of the profound insights into a new cosmology the embraces a gracious God deeply at work organically in creation through evolution.

This is why it is such an exciting time to be talking about spirituality and to be in community where these conversations are happening.

We see more fully the goodness, beauty, and truth of God deeply at work in the creation of our cosmos; and our imaginations then widen as we ponder this gracious God and what this all-loving God hopes for all of creation.

We remember what St. Bonaventure in the 1200's offered to us about God. For Bonaventure, God is a "fountain-fullness" of love, beauty, and goodness that overflows into creation. God's love pours forth in the creation of this most beautiful cosmos all around us.

This cosmos, or to use an even earlier image, this "enchanted garden" is created, sustained, and nourished by God's immanent presence with us. "God breathes with us" in every moment of our lives, and with all that lives.

Merciful God and Joy

These deeper images of God remind us, like the generous, forgiving parent in the story of the prodigal son ... that God's heart is full of mercy and understanding, that God wants only to embrace us, heal us, and rejoice with us. In fact in the first reading today, the image is of God wanting to "dance for joy with us." This is the message of this third Advent weekend: the message of joy, letting God rejoice over us, and all of us being called to rejoice in God's love for us!

Struggles in Life

This may be difficult for some of us because of the losses in our lives. We may be dealing with sickness ourselves or the illness of a loved one, or we may have lost a spouse or a child recently. Worries about our families may weigh us down, or we may be carrying negative baggage from our family history or from trials in our lives.

But the call to rejoice is still there because God's loving concern for us is always with us.

It is important that we allow God's goodness to stir us ... and to let go of older, incomplete images of judgement, fear, or condemnation ... to make sure that negative images of God do not add weight to our struggles in life.

Luke's Gospel Today

The Gospel reading today is a good example. How many of us heard the line about the Anointed One coming "with the Holy Spirit and fire" to baptize and re-make us? And how many of us heard the line about the chaff being "burned with unquenchable fire"? You don't have to raise your hands ... but I imagine most of us more fully heard the line about "unquenchable fire" and wondered whether we would be part of the "chaff" (those not good enough) getting burned up!

But, in truth, we all have “chaff” in our lives that we need to let go of in order to be healed. And the “good news” is that Jesus is **coming with the Holy Spirit and a passionate, fiery love** that will burn away the chaff in our lives so we are freer and healthier to love God and one another.

Being “Perfect”

Wrapped up here, I believe, is a misguided view of God wanting us to be “perfect.” Yes, I believe with you that God wants us to be moral and good; but most of all, God wants us to be loving and forgiving and have a “mellowness of heart” as St. John of the Cross reminded us this week on his feast day. We are called to be “mellow of heart” with ourselves and with one another.

Yes, there is the line in the Gospels about “be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect,” but the words really are better translated as ‘be as open-hearted and loving as God is with all of us.’

I came across this beautiful paragraph on “perfection” this week that I would like to share with you.

Inconsistencies, imperfections, and failures to live up to ideals are all part of what it means to be human. What seems to distinguish those who are most deeply and wholly human is not their perfection, but their courage in accepting their imperfections. Accepting themselves as they are, they then are free to become more than they presently are. And, accepting themselves as they are, they then become able to accept others as they are.

David G. Benner, “Perfection and the Harmonics of Wholeness,” in Oneing: A Publication of the Center for Action and Contemplation, 2016, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 59-63.

This is a beautiful paragraph to help us accept our lives and reality as it is, especially as we face our own passage into eternal life.

We are in this together

One other point here that stands out in John’s preaching is that as the various persons asked him “What must I do in light of God’s closeness to show my repentance?” ... John responds with “relational” insights and encouragements. John encourages each group to ‘do better by’ the persons around them.

Deeply at work here is the truth that we find our salvation together in how we treat one another and how we further **the wholeness** of the human family. We must watch the “singularity,” the “me and Jesus” attitude, that creeps in with the “perfection” model. In the perfection model, it is all about how **I** am doing with God.

The Gospel message is always about how **we** are doing, and we find our **salvation together**.

Another helpful quote here is:

The world cannot be changed by love to become just unless we are changed by love to become whole, *but* we cannot be made whole without engaging in the work of making the world whole. Personal transformation and social transformation are one piece.

Jack Jezreel, "To Love Without Exception," in Onening: A Publication of the Center for Action and Contemplation, 2016, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 47-52.

God's enterprise is about our personal salvation, but the Gospel helps us see that our salvation **is always woven together with others' salvation.**

Conclusion

There is much to ponder this Sunday and in preparation for our Christmas feast.

Fr. Henry B. Beck, OFM / St. Francis Retreat House, Easton, PA.