**Bishop Bradley’s Reflections on the Sunday Readings**

December 11, 2016 Third Sunday of Advent

The Church tells us that today is a special day---a day to be joyful. It’s *Gaudete Sunday*, which is Latin for “Rejoice” Sunday, because we are more than half-way through this brief season of Advent and on the verge of celebrating the great Solemnity of Christmas! So, no matter what is going on in our lives, we should rejoice. However, as we all know, sometimes that’s “easier said than done”. While I’m sure we would all love to focus on the primary reason why Christmas is so important---namely to celebrate the Birth of Christ---in many people’s lives there may be lots of reasons why it is difficult to be joyful right now. Sometimes no matter how well we might make plans, there are always those unplanned realities that can interfere, from things as serious as a health concern, a major financial loss, or a personal crisis all the way to something as inconsequential but still a concern as the 10 inches of snow that is falling on this special day! Things like bad weather can change our Christmas shopping plans and even worse, it provides a potential for dangerous travel conditions. In fact, things are so bad that we were forced to cancel the Gaudete/Christmas reception for all those who participate in various ways in the work of the Church here in the Diocese. It is my hope that we will reschedule for sometime after the new year. But these awful weather conditions, much more importantly, are life-threatening for the homeless and those of limited means. As the saying goes, the best laid plans sometimes go awry.

We heard in today’s Gospel passage about John the Baptist. We heard about him last week as well, but that image of John the Baptist was far different than the one we hear about today. Last week, John was just beginning his public ministry of calling all people to repentance as he began preparing the way for the Messiah’s coming. Today’s passage is found eight chapters later in St. Matthew’s Gospel, and here we see a very different John. He’s in prison, and he seems to be beaten, unsure and confused; it seems that he’s wondering if Jesus really is the Messiah for Whom the world had been waiting for generations, and about Whom he had been preaching and pointing people to follow. So he decides to send two of his own disciples to ask Jesus directly: “*Are you the One Who is to come, or should we look for another?”*

As we heard Jesus’ response, His answer was more circumstantial than direct, as He said: “*Go tell John what you see and hear: the blind see, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news preached to them.”* These were the signs of the Messiah that had been foretold by all the Old Testatment Prophets. What Jesus wanted John to know is: Yes, John, you have given all the right answers and now, you’ve asked the most important question: I am the One Who is to come, and the long-awaited Kingdom of God is here in Me.

From our vantage point in 2016 here in snowy southwest Michigan, the Kingdom of God is here, and it is still unfolding; God’s Kingdom is always in process of being completed. We too should look around us; do we see signs of the Kingdom in our midst? People who have been blind to God’s presence in their lives come to see and embrace His love; people who had never heard the joy of God’s Word have the Truth preached to them; those who had experienced emotional deaths of important relationships can find new life through their relationship with Jesus. When we live our lives in God’s ways, when we love God and neighbor, when we forgive those who have offended us, and show mercy to those who have hurt us, when we practice the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, live our lives rooted in the Beatitudes, and pursue justice for the oppressed----those are the signs of God’s Kingdom among us that continues to unfold. The Kingdom of God will not be completed in this world. That’s why this season of Advent focuses our attention not only on preparing to celebrate Jesus’ first coming on the day of His Birth in Bethlehem, but more importantly that we are preparing for the day of His final coming at the end of time. It will be then that God’s Kingdom on earth will be joined and completed with the Kingdom in Heaven. We pray that time won’t come for a long, long while; yet as people of faith we look forward to that time with hope, or in the words of my own Episcopal motto, as we keep “*waiting in joyful hope”* for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

In the meantime, we deal with life’s unplanned circumstances, from human suffering to winter snow storms, and realize that Advent is not about the absence of suffering; rather Advent helps us to find joy in the midst of suffering----through suffering---in spite of suffering. Advent is not just about preparing to celebrate the Birth of a Baby; it’s also about the Baby Who grows into the Man Who endures the Cross for the salvation of the world, and Whose Resurrection destroys the power of sin and death. What we celebrate at Christmas is that Christ has come, and remains with us always. God is present in all things, even our suffering, and unplanned mishaps. God is at work in all things, to help to bring good even out of our pain, confusion, doubt and discouragement.

That’s why Isaiah’s prophecy in today’s First Reading is so true: “*Be strong. Fear not. Here is your God. He comes with vindication…He comes to save you. Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf be cleared, then will the lame leap like a stag….they will meet with joy and gladness, sorrow and mourning will flee.”* This is what we are called to do on this Third Sunday of Advent, just two weeks away from Christmas. We don’t rejoice because everything is perfect, but because in our imperfection---in our suffering, sorrow and sadness---in all of our life circumstances, planned and unplanned, God ***is*** with us!

God bless you, now and always.

Faithfully yours in Christ,

+ Bishop Paul J. Bradley