

FIRST READING: Micah 5:1-4a

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Micah:

Thus says the LORD: You, Bethlehem-Ephrathah too small to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel; whose origin is from of old, from ancient times. Therefore the Lord will give them up, until the time when she who is to give birth has borne, and the rest of his kindred shall return to the children of Israel. He shall stand firm and shepherd his flock by the strength of the LORD, in the majestic name of the LORD, his God; and they shall remain, for now his greatness shall reach to the ends of the earth; he shall be peace.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19.

Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.

O shepherd of Israel, hearken, from your throne upon the cherubim, shine forth. Rouse your power, and come to save us.

Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.

Once again, O Lord of hosts, look down from heaven, and see; take care of this vine, and protect what your right hand has planted the son of man whom you yourself made strong.

Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.

May your help be with the man of your right hand, with the son of man whom you yourself made strong. Then we will no more withdraw from you; give us new life, and we will call upon your name.

Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.

SECOND READING: Hebrews 10:5-10

A reading from the Letter to the Hebrews:

Brothers and sisters: When Christ came into the world, he said: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; in holocausts and sin offerings you took no delight. Then I said, 'As is written of me in the scroll, behold, I come to do your will, O God.'" First he says, "Sacrifices and offerings, holocausts and sin offerings, you neither desired nor delighted in." These are offered according to the law. Then he says, "Behold, I come to do your will." He takes away the first to establish the second. By this "will," we have been consecrated through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

The word of the Lord.

GOSPEL: Luke 1:39-45

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke:

Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the infant

leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice and said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 4th Sunday of Advent

What is a prophet? What is a prophet's message? These are critical questions. We are people who always live in the present. Yesterday is past and tomorrow never comes for now is always today. We remember the past, though and always seek insight into what's to come. A prophet can be mistaken for one who sees the future and knows what's to come. Some see a prophet as a fortune teller. However, fortune telling is expressly forbidden by Mosaic and Church law. Only God knows the future. A prophet is one who discerns God's message and shares it. A prophet's message is God's Word. A prophet is basically a preacher.

This is the most important insight into prophesy. We all pray, as Jesus taught us, in the Our Father, "Thy Kingdom come; thy will be done." This is the context of the prophet's call, mission and message. All of us, through our baptism, have the call to be a prophet. We discern God's will, way and presence our entire life. We believe that as the Holy Spirit guides us, we give witness to God's Word through the lives we lead. Even though God's Word has little to do with telling the future, it is about things that will happen. Prophecy assures us that God will remain with God's people always, through thick and thin.

When we hear in the reading from Micah about Bethlehem, a pregnant woman to give birth and shepherds, of what do we think? The birth of Jesus. That's natural. However Micah's prophesy had another context and meaning. It referred to his own time and situation. Bethlehem was the birthplace of King David. Within the context of impending foreign invasion, to have an able, active and faithful king was people's profound hope. The child to be born was to lead the nation as king. God's Messiah, in that context, was not Jesus, yet. The powerful aspect of scripture, being God's Word, is its lasting and enduring impact. We see Jesus reflected in Micah's message. Micah's intent was not the same as God's intent. God's intent has led to our belief.

Free will has always been one of the hallmarks of Christian faith. We choose to follow Jesus. We turn to God because we want to do so. Why, then, do we pray in the responsorial, "Lord, make us turn to you?" God's grace, we believe, is sufficient. Sufficient for what? God's grace has brought us to life, faith, family and community. God's amazing grace saves, forgives and leads us to new life. God's grace will also bring about God's kingdom. What we think, feel, say, choose and do is all due to God's grace. Wanting to choose God is God's grace.

In the former translation of the Sacramentary there is the fourth common preface that says this well. "You have no need of our praise. Yet our desire to thank you is itself your gift. This can sound like double talk, but it reveals a deep truth about how God works; through us. Everything is God's gift; all is God's grace. Everything depends upon God; yet we live and work as if it all depends upon us. We may not like God's gifts, sometimes, for those we don't want to accept

are those with which we must still deal. Amid those challenges, God's grace is still there; as our strength to cope. God is there to forgive us when we fail.

Sacrifice is a curious word. To us, when we sacrifice, we can experience hardship or loss. We talk of Jesus death as a sacrifice for our sins. Jesus gave up his life for us to save us. However, the origin of the word is a bit different. It is made of two Latin words, *sacra* (meaning holy) and *ficio* (*facio* meaning to make). When we sacrifice during Advent or Lent, what do we do? We give up something in the hope to be better people; holier people. When Jesus gave up his life, we gained God's life. We were made holy through Jesus' offering up his life on the cross to God. When we give up something, it is our hope that God will give us what we need to complete what we started. It's not so much what we offer God but what God first offers us; his grace. God always makes us holy for only God is holy. We become holy as we know God's presence. God never leaves us; so are we never not holy? Even in sin, when we need God the most, God is there to forgive. God is love that is infinite, eternal, always immanent and especially, unconditional.

This is the heart of the message from Hebrews. All depends on God. It's possible for us to assume that there's something we can offer God. God made the cosmos, you and me. God has offered all to us instead. We have it backward, often. We can always go through the motions employing empty gestures, rituals and prayers. Such things, apart from God's grace have no meaning. It is out of love that God works and in God's love that we live, move and have our being. Jesus won this by his sacrifice, once and for all. We cannot save our selves. We receive what Jesus has offered.

The Benedictines have a saying, "Treat all guests as Christ." Hospitality is one of the order's charisms. Hospitality was also a mainstay of first century Jewish life. In Luke's gospel we have a good example of what it was like. Look at the circumstances in the story; none are ideal. Mary was a yet-to-be-wed pregnant teenage girl. Elizabeth was a pregnant woman in her forties; later on than Mary too. The former could be considered a scandal; the latter a wonder. Why would a woman at least six months pregnant have such delight over a lingering visit by a teenage pregnant girl? It was probably more of a shock that could cause Elizabeth to go into labor. Elizabeth was in seclusion and Mary went to hide.

Yet their dialogue told us a much different story. They both interpreted this experience in a much different manner. There are some members of my family that I may prefer not to see. Do I let them know that? How do we respond to someone who's just gotten a very bad haircut? Do we say, "That's alright, it'll grow out," or do we say, "Nice haircut?" Hopefully we can all be polite to a fellow human being; thus living out our Christian Charity as a sign of our faith. That may have been the case between these two cousins. They weren't Christians, yet. They were still people of faith and faithful to Judaism.

Elizabeth interpreted the fetal kick as a leap for joy. When she saw her cousin, she saw a beloved one too. "Blessed...," Elizabeth said. What did she actually see in Mary? God's abiding presence, one who said yes to God and to God's plan, one who carried a child that came from God as God's gift and with Mary she knew that God was in their midst. This is not spin on a possibly unpleasant situation but a true testament of faith as this woman found God's presence in her young cousin. This was not just making lemonade out of a bunch of sour lemons. It was an awareness of God being near; a testament to their collective faith.

Even if Elizabeth's positive interpretation of these events were not easy for her and it may have taken some effort, she was able to say what she did by the grace of God. She may have had some underlying reservations. Her spoken response to Mary and her disposition of welcome to her were hers none the less. It's the action, her witness of faith that is important. What we do is always more important than how we feel. The act of kindness is more important than who receives it. People see our actions, not our inward feelings, thank God. The blessing then falls back on the doer. Elizabeth has lived the blessing of God as she blessed Mary.

I hate getting shots; yet I have gotten three of them. I hate wearing a mask; they are uncomfortable. I hate Purell; I still use it. I once made a mistake and referred to it as Puerile. I can't get that thought out of my head. I prefer soap and water, but I don't have a sink with running water in my car. My feelings don't matter. To end, or at least slow, the spread of COVID 19 is my goal. Since God works through all of us, how else can we show God to a waiting world? Keeping others and ourselves safe is the way God has called us to act.

We all seek God. We seek God's presence, help, guidance and forgiveness. We can find God where ever we look. There are many places to look. The first place is within our own self. When we know God is with us, when we know Immanuel, we can find God in all people, in all events and all our experience. That's the lesson of Elizabeth to us.

When we know Jesus in the breaking of the bread, we can know him anywhere; he accompanies us everywhere.

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