

FIRST READING

A reading from the Song of Songs 2:8-14

Hark! my lover – here he comes springing across the mountains, leaping across the hills. My lover is like a gazelle or a young stag. Here he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, peering through the lattices. My lover speaks; he says to me, “Arise, my beloved, my dove, my beautiful one, and come! “For see, the winter is past, the rains are over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth, the time of pruning the vines has come, and the song of the dove is heard in our land. The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines, in bloom, give forth fragrance. Arise, my beloved, my beautiful one, and come! “O my dove in the clefts of the rock, in the secret recesses of the cliff, Let me see you, let me hear your voice, For your voice is sweet, and you are lovely.”

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 33:2-3, 11-12, 20-21

Exult, you just, in the Lord! Sing to him a new song.

Give thanks to the LORD on the harp; with the ten-stringed lyre chant his praises. Sing to him a new song; pluck the strings skillfully, with shouts of gladness.

Exult, you just, in the Lord! Sing to him a new song.

But the plan of the LORD stands forever; the design of his heart, through all generations. Blessed the nation whose God is the LORD, the people he has chosen for his own inheritance.

Exult, you just, in the Lord! Sing to him a new song.

Our soul waits for the LORD, who is our help and our shield, For in him our hearts rejoice; in his holy name we trust.

Exult, you just, in the Lord! Sing to him a new song.

GOSPEL: Luke 1:39-45

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke:

Mary set out in those days 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, “Most 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 December 21 Tuesday of the 4th Week of Advent

We don’t read passages from the Song of Songs very often. When I was in grammar school, we read it from the perspective of faith and religion. It was really about God’s loving relationship with God’s people and Jesus’ loving relationship with his Church. When I began to study

scripture, I learned that it was also a sensual, secular poem or song between two lovers. It has erotic imagery in its poetry. There's a story I heard when I was in grad school in the seminary in Mundelein.

A priest and nun taught an evening elective course on the Song of Songs. For several years they taught it and their course was a popular one. They would, as part of the course they taught, take the parts of the two lovers and read them aloud to the class and each other. Their teaching at the seminary ended when they left their vocations to marry each other. There is no doubt to the sensual beauty of the entire poem. Any good love song can relate to any lover; we do love God and God does love us. God loves those professors too.

Even though there are two separate voices or characters in the poem, someone, inspired by God as the author was, wrote this. From our perspective as fellow human beings, don't we have divided hearts? Isn't there ambivalence as part of all our relationships? There is not a clear division between our physical and spiritual awareness. At no time can we be physical or spiritual separately. We are human not angelic beings. Without a spirit, we'd be dead. Obvious when I put it thusly, isn't it? We are both physical and spiritual at the same time; always. This is the way I approach this book.

The lover has strength, power, purpose, vibrancy and intent. The poetic imagery is powerful in its description. The lover approaches and calls the beloved to approach reciprocally. Does the beloved have an awareness of the beloved's specialness, beauty and how deeply the lover is able to love? "Let me see you; let me hear you," the lover calls. I maintain that the author is male. Ask any gal who the most beautiful woman in the world could be and they will attempt to name one. Ask any guy the same question and his eyes will go out of focus for a moment as he knows it's the one he loves. I hear that in this passage.

God loves each of us with an intensity just like that. Each of us is beloved of God in just this way. We see our sin when we examine ourselves. Under God's eyes, God can only see us as God sees all creation. We are good, full of life and possibility for God sees only God reflected in us. God is love, infinitely, eternally and unconditionally. We have limits of our vision that God does not share; God has no limits. For God, all is possibility.

There's a line in this passage, "For see, the winter is past." Today at 9:58 AM that is true. It's the winter solstice. From then on, the days get longer. We have no idea as to when Jesus birth occurred. Christmas had been the pagan Roman feast of Sol Invictus, in English the Invincible Son. It occurred after the longest night of the year as the nights began to grow shorter and daylight time lengthened. The Church fathers took it over as Jesus' birthday, capitalizing on the theme of light; Jesus, the light of the world. They also wanted to eliminate carousing, revelry, over eating and drunkenness. At least they got the symbolism right.

What, then, is God's relationship with each of us? That's where our relationship with God begins. God has loved us so much that he sent his son as our redeemer that as we believe in Jesus we may inherit eternal life in God's Kingdom. It is more important that God has loved us first. From God's love for us comes the life we now live, any love we know, the family, friends and gifts we have now. He's also given us the promise of eternal life. To get there, he will forgive our sins. Even as a sensual poem between two lovers, the poetry reveals this truth.

We just had this gospel on Sunday, two days ago. Normally I dread this. I would have just shot my wad on it then. However, I'm not preaching, I'm writing. This gives me a bit more freedom

of thought. I can refer you to Sunday's reflection to set the context for the reading and develop a fresher perspective. I hate repeating myself. Today's reading of the passage let me ask a simple question. It's clear that both Elizabeth and Mary have a deep and abiding faith and trust in God. They were able to discern God's will and agreed to follow it. However, they did so as if stepping out into an abyss of thin air with no visible means of support, protection or rescue. From the narrative they provided for each other a powerful bond of trust; in God and each other. From where did that come?

Elizabeth and Mary's bodies had not yet produced John or Jesus. They had no idea of what would happen. John was not yet the Baptist. Jesus had not yet manifested his identity as Son of God, Messiah and Savior. Who could have anticipated the manner of their cruel, unjust, painful and messy deaths? Here's the real critical part to their faith, hope and trust in God. From our perspective, we know what would happen. John touched many before he pointed to Jesus mission and ministry prior to his execution. Jesus' execution led to Easter, Ascension, Pentecost and the promise of God's Kingdom. We live in the times after the events of the Gospel and in the promise of the Kingdom yet to come. Mary and Elizabeth would witness these things unfold. They were living now, experiencing life as it unfolded. So do we. We share their expectant hope in light of Jesus' return.

May we always seek, hope and trust in God as God loves us to faith

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