

## Homily - December 10, 2023 – Second Sunday of Advent



Two of my favorite books of all time, The Shack (William Paul Young) and The Five People You Meet In Heaven (Mitch Albom) were both turned into movies. I don't find this very often, but I did find these two movies were every bit as good as the books that spawned them. While they are both

pure fiction, they nevertheless include deep truths about life, faith, forgiveness, and love that give you reason to do some self-reflection before moving on to the next chapter. They are the only two books I've read where the main character dies, seemingly goes to heaven, and looks back on his life with a much bigger and truer perspective. It invited me, the reader, to do the same. But because life is so busy, and I'm multitasking like all of you are, I rarely slow down long enough to extract myself from the many dramas that I get drawn into. It's good to step outside yourself, from time to time, and see yourself from above. It's like people who have had near-death experiences; they temporarily hover above, always returning to their bodies changed forever.

The protagonists, the main characters in these books/movies, have their eyes opened as they are given a chance to look back on their lives with a new set of eyes and a new set of priorities. With these new insights into all the ways God was present to them thus far in life, they vow to never take life or God or people for granted anymore. They move forward with a new purpose in life. You don't need to have a near-death experience to feel God's call to conversion. You just have to do, as the Gospels say, "Keep awake."

The spiritual life has less to do with how to get *to* God and more to do with creating space *for* God to get to us. When we make an effort to lower the mountains, raise the valleys, grade the roads, lay the asphalt, and to make a highway for our God, God has a much easier time coming to us. Lowering the

mountains of our imperial ego and raising the valleys, the dignity of others, is much harder than building a physical road. But it's also much more rewarding.

Not only is the gospel, with the poorly groomed John the Baptist, very visual, but I find the first reading from Isaiah visually appealing as well. It's the year 536 B.C. Picture our Jewish ancestors in faith coming to the end of their 50-year exile in Babylon. Everything important to them—their home, their religion, their language, their family, and friends—had been taken away from them. Yet, in their darkest hour, God tells Isaiah to be a messenger of good news. God was saying, "Isaiah, I want you to speak tenderly to my people. Tell them their time of exile is over. Speak words that bring them comfort and not guilt or shame. Remind them their penalty is paid, and I long to have them back home in Israel and, more importantly, back home in my arms. I want to hug them and carry them like a shepherd who gathers the lambs in his arms."

The imagery continues and God continues, "Isaiah, get yourself up to a high mountain (Jerusalem is built on a hill, the Temple Mount). Gather the people of Jerusalem who were left behind 50 years ago when their families and friends were torn apart from them and deported to Babylon. Round up these neglected people and tell them to look into the distance. Why? Because I'm about to reveal my glory. Isaiah, tell these people, who have no hope in their eyes, these people who haven't seen their relatives for 50 years, to look far in the distance. Then you, Isaiah, lift up your voice with strength and say this, **'People of Jerusalem and all the cities of Judah, HERE IS YOUR GOD!'** Look into the distance, people, God is carrying your long-lost family and friends home to you. God has scooped up your loved ones and is bringing them all home. Everything you ever longed for coming to you carried in the arms of God."

In their hopelessness, they never thought they would see this, yet God was making it happen before their very eyes.

If God's word is a living word spoken to us today, can we picture ourselves atop our own Temple Mount? Looking out to the horizon we see what appears to be

only a dot. Not much to see. Squinting a little harder, we recognize the dot is getting closer and bigger until we realize it is not a dot at all; it's Jesus. He's carrying all the exiles of the world toward us. His arms are large enough to carry our joys and our sorrows, our achievements and our embarrassing failures, our proud accomplishments and our shameful breakdowns, our integrity and our dishonesty, our generosity and our self-centeredness. Somebody shouts, "**Here is your God!**"

The image gets closer still. The arms of the Shepherd are bigger than we ever imagined. In those arms are the hungry, the tent people, those living with addictions, the faithful churchgoers and those who never darken the doors of the Church. There are still more lambs in the shepherd's arms. He's carrying those who suffer from self-doubt, the unemployed, those living with chronic medical conditions, the lonely and depressed, the widowed, the married, the divorced, and everyone for whom labels don't apply. Someone shouts even louder, "**Here is your God.**"

A man appears next to Isaiah dressed in camel's hairs with a leather belt twisted around his waist and in desperate need of a haircut. Like Isaiah, he tells us all on that mountain to keep looking not at him but at the Shepherd who is still at a distance but drawing nearer and nearer. Then in a moment, the veil parts, your consciousness is enlightened and, all of a sudden, you are watching yourself from above. From this vantage point, the picture has never been more clear. You see what you have never seen before—the Shepherd is, and always has been, carrying you. Every feeling of shame, guilt, embarrassment, degraded love, and unworthiness vanishes like a mist. What is left in the Shepherd's arms is the only thing the Shepherd ever wanted and ever loved from the beginning—your True Self.

The Gospel of Mark starts this way: ***The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*** Almost nobody gets it right, what it means for Jesus to be the Son of God. At the end of the Gospel, a Roman centurion—of all people—gets it right. He looks up at Jesus on the Cross and says, "***Truly, this was the Son of***

**God.”** By saying, “Truly, this is the Son of God,” the centurion is saying what Isaiah has always been saying, **“Here is your God.”**

I pray that this Advent will be a time when you can look at all that is broken and all that is whole, within yourself and within the world, and say, **“Here is your God.”**

-Fr. Phil