

Homily for December 24th, 2024 (Christmas Eve)

I don't know if you picked up on it or not, but all three readings--Isaiah, Paul's letter to Titus, and Luke's gospel—all spoke of rejoicing and good news. Isaiah



says, “The darkness that once covered you is gone, for a light is shining upon you now, so rejoice like farmers rejoice at harvest time. Rejoice like one who once had a heavy burden, a bar across their shoulder, but now that weight is gone.” St. Paul says to Titus, “The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation

to all.” And finally, in the gospel, the Angel of the Lord tells the shepherds, “I am bringing good news of great joy for all the people.”

We know that the scriptures were not primarily written from historical or scientific points of view; they are faith stories meant to stir faith within us. Nevertheless, much of it is historical and actually did take place. We also know that good news and rejoicing is hard to come by, seemingly out of reach, for a lot of people. They crave it, they want it, they need it, but it always seems to be just beyond them, unattainable. These are the ones who need it the most. These are the ones the Lord runs to like a father who runs to his prodigal son or a shepherd who runs to his lost sheep. These are the one who crave good news and rejoicing, and the Lord comes to them as a Wonderful Counsellor, a Mighty God, an Everlasting Father, and as a Prince of Peace.

A distinction between history and “salvation history” may be helpful in our search for good news. History, as you know, is primarily about what has taken place in the past. It’s a chronology of events over time. We hope it’s an accurate portrayal of past events, but that isn’t always the case. Often history is told from the side of the victors, the winners, the power brokers, those who have influence. Even more disturbing are people who deny historical events like the Holocaust deniers.

Salvation history is different. It’s not told from the view point of the powerful—the view point of the kings, queens, presidents, prime ministers or victorious military generals. Salvation history is not simply about past events but is an account of what God has done and what God is still doing among us. The Bible remains the only book ever written from the perspective of the lowly ones and how God raises up the lowly. Salvation history isn’t fixed on past event but on all the ways God is still bringing about a new heaven and a new earth. But don’t think of history and salvation history as two, separate, parallel paths and that our job as Christians is to ignore history and just focus on salvation history. No. Christmas tells us that God is incarnate, God is intertwined in the history of the world. God’s saving work, God’s hand, God’s grace is always working and breaking through historical events, even the history of your little life and mine.

On the second week of Advent, we had a gospel reading where God’s word bypassed all the shakers and movers of the time—the emperor, the governors, the high priest—and came to a simple man named John (the Baptist) in the wilderness. Today’s gospel starts off with the most powerful man at that time, Caesar Augustus, seemingly calling the shots. He’s ordered a census and expects

everyone to fall in line by going back to their place of birth to be registered. Neither Caesar Augustus nor governor Quirinius are interested in counting heads. What they're interested in is devising a strategy for raising taxes. More taxes means more soldiers, more weapons, more power, and more ways of keeping people down. That's history.

At work, underneath this history is salvation history. God's subversive plan for humanity is at work, undetected by those who think they are in charge. God's glory and power do not come to the power brokers of that world but to the lowly shepherds who were living on the bottom rung of society's ladder with no hope of improvement. Once Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds are introduced, Caesar Augustus and Quirinius are relegated to the shadows where they belong, never to be heard from again. Caesar Augustus was just a pawn in God's larger plan of bringing salvation to the world, and he never caught on. Salvation history has now pushed into regular history changing it forever.

How do we go from unknowing participants in history to deliberate participants in salvation history? We do it by first letting go of fear. Fear keeps us paralyzed. While we hunger for a better world, we also fear it in the same way we fear anything and everything that is unknown to us. We settle for, "better the devil I know than the devil I don't know." We settle for second, or third best.

When the teenage Mary is caught off guard by the Angel Gabriel, before the angel could tell her that she had been chosen to be the mother of the Messiah, the angel first says, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." In

other words, “Salvation history is pushing into the world, Mary, and you are part of it. Say yes, Mary, and let your faith guide you the rest of the way.” A second Advent story is the story of the Angel of the Lord appearing to Joseph who was secretly scheming to dismiss Mary. The first thing the angel says to him is, “Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. God’s salvation is pushing into your life, Joseph, and into the history of the world. Say yes to that, Joseph, even though I know you are shaking in your boots.” And then, in today’s story, the Angel said to the shepherds, “Do not be afraid; for see—I bring you good news of great joy for all the people, for unto you is born a Savior.” Maybe it’s no coincidence that the expression, “Do not be afraid,” or “Fear not,” is repeated 365 times in the Bible, once for every day of the year.

Once people overcame their fear, God’s glory broke into the world never to return to the heavens. God came in a powerful way in the birth of Jesus and has remained with us, to this very day, in his Risen Spirit.

Take a moment and think about a past time that was difficult for you to get through, in fact, you were sure you wouldn’t make it through (pause). But here you are today. You are standing on solid ground today, but at the time, the ground was crumbling beneath your feet. Once you came through it, you inwardly say, “Someone was looking down upon me, caring and guiding me when I was falling apart.” It was then that God’s salvation was pushing into the world, your world, and for a brief moment you heard a voice say, “I am bringing you good news of great joy, a joy that is not just for you but for all the people.”

Salvation is at hand. Jesus is born. A new heaven and a new earth is also about to be born.

~Fr. Phil