

Archbishop Lori's Homily: Fourth Sunday of Advent

4th Sunday of Advent, Year C

*St. Joseph Cathedral
Wheeling, West Virginia*

Dec. 22, 2018

Introduction

I'm grateful for the opportunity to return here to the Cathedral of St. Joseph and to the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston on this, the Fourth Sunday of Advent.

Since it is impossible for me to be here on Christmas owing to my responsibilities in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, I had planned to come here in January for the Feast of the Epiphany. Unfortunately, those plans had to change because Pope Francis has asked all the bishops of the United States to gather for eight days of prayer in early January at a seminary near Chicago.

So, here I am this evening, delighted to be with all of you in the Cathedral and with those of you who are participating in this Mass by television.

It has been quite a difficult year for the Church throughout the world, in the United States, and here in the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston. Let me thank you from the bottom of my heart for your patient, persevering faith in the midst of these trials brought about by the sins and crimes of church leaders over decades.

I am truly sorry that so many have been harmed and that the faith of so many has been shaken.

As your interim pastor, the apostolic administrator of your diocese, it is my humble hope and prayer to walk with you and to continue taking steps that will lead to greater transparency and accountability and indeed to the purification and renewal of the Church we love so much.

It is to that pressing goal – the purification and renewal of the Church – that this evening's readings for the 4th Sunday of Advent speak; let us briefly reflect upon them.

The Prophet Micah

And we begin with the first reading from the Book of the Prophet Micah. That prophet, Micah, might not be a household name like Isaiah or Ezekiel. Nonetheless, he brings us a message of hope, a message of hope which has resounded throughout the centuries, a message of hope which reaches our ears on the cusp of Christmas.

It is this message that will lead us through our personal challenges toward renewal and this same message that will lead our beloved church to renewed purity and vigor.

But let us not forget when it was that Micah wrote this message of hope. It was the eighth century before the birth of Christ, a time when, for the people of Israel the world seemed to be falling apart.

Having been delivered from the slavery of Egypt and led into the Promised Land, God's people were now facing the destruction of Jerusalem and Samaria.

Indeed, they were about to be deported and taken to Babylon in exile. Everything that they held near and dear was about to crumble and vanish.

In those darkest of days Micah proclaimed that the deliverance of God's people would come, and that it would come from the least likely source: from the smallest of the clans of Judah, from humble Bethlehem. From this humble clan, he predicted, would arise a leader who would deliver an oppressed people back to their homeland, Israel, a leader who would not only restore the plundered and profaned temple in Jerusalem but also a leader who would bring the people that definitive peace and holiness for which the human spirit longs.

Listening to Micah's ancient prophecy, are not our hearts filled with hope? For, ultimately, Micah is foretelling the Birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem, Jesus Christ, our Savior, our Shepherd, he who is our peace (cf. Micah 1:4; Eph. 2:14).

The Letter to the Hebrews

Our second reading, taken from the Letter to the Hebrews, describes how Micah's message of hope would come to fulfillment in the Savior's birth.

Now, the Letter to the Hebrews doesn't describe the wondrous events that surrounded the birth of Jesus – the starlit sky, the angels, the shepherds . . . but it does tell us what is most fundamental about Jesus' birth, the very thing you and I must believe in and pin our hopes upon . . . and it's this:

Jesus, God's Son, came into the world, not appearing as an angel, but rather assuming our humanity, including the lowliness of our human flesh. It was as if Jesus himself had said: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me" (Heb. 10:5).

If, in the Old Testament, animals were sacrificed to God to take away sin, now, in the New Covenant, it is Jesus, the Son of God made man, who will accomplish the saving will of the Father by dying in our humanity, our flesh, to save us from our sins.

God the Father willed that his Son lay down his life out of love for sinful humanity. "By this 'will,'" the author reminds us, "we have been consecrated through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Heb. 10:10).

The Gospel of St. Luke

We share in Jesus' sacrificial offering whenever we participate in the Eucharist. That sacrifice is renewed as bread and wine are consecrated and become, no longer bread and wine, but the Body and Blood of Christ.

When we receive the Lord worthily and he lives more deeply within us, then it is we ourselves who are consecrated, who ourselves are made holy, For just as Jesus dwelt in Mary's womb through the power of the Holy Spirit, so too, through the Eucharist, Jesus dwells within us – within our Church, within our parishes, within our families, within our hearts.

If only we believed in this mystery with all our hearts – for it is the intimate and living Presence of Jesus in our midst that is our hope!

In the Gospel of St. Luke we see what Mary did when she learnt that Jesus dwelt in her. She did not sit at home, take care of herself, or ponder how God had favored her. No, St. Luke tells us that she got up and went in haste into the hill country to visit her aged cousin Elizabeth who carried in her womb John the Baptist.

Mary made a difficult journey, traveling some ninety miles over Judea's hilly terrain to bring Jesus to the doorstep of the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth.

She who was full of grace, she who carried the Savior in her womb, appeared there, just as the Ark of the Covenant had come to Judah back in the days of King David.

Now Mary arrives as the new Ark of the Covenant, or as St. John Paul II once said, "[Mary] became in some way a 'tabernacle' - the first 'tabernacle' in history - in which the Son of God, still invisible to the human gaze, allowed himself to be adored by Elizabeth, radiating his light as it were through the eyes and voice of Mary" (John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* № 55).

And as the baby in her womb leapt for joy, Elizabeth said to her cousin Mary, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

Tonight, as we receive the Holy Eucharist, may we conceive Christ anew in our hearts and, like Mary, carry him into the world.

Consecrated by the Eucharist, filled with the new life of Christ, full of faith - we too must hasten into the hill country with the message of salvation. Like Mary, we too will have to make a difficult journey - a journey that will, to be sure, take us over the hills and mountains of West Virginia - but also indeed over the steeper hills, the steeper challenges, of bringing Christ to those who have left the Church, to those who have been harmed in the Church, to those who are skeptical, to those who are sick, poor, suffering, and lonely.

Perhaps the greatest challenge of all, sometimes, is bringing the Lord to loved ones, to family members, especially to many young people and young adults who have never really been formed in the faith and who find themselves facing the challenges of life without a firm foundation in Christ.

May we not falter on our journey through the hill country!

May we bring to others the Good News and the living Presence of Christ!

For, as St. Paul urges us, “Proclaim the word. Be persistent...!” (2 Tim. 4:2).

Conclusion

Yes, it has been quite a year, and indeed a difficult year on so many fronts, but as we peer into the crèche and gaze upon the radiant face of the Christ-Child, receiving the Lord into our hearts today and at Christmas, may our eyes of faith see the hope of a new beginning for ourselves, our beloved Church and our world.

May you and your families know the deepest joy and peace of Christmas and may God bless you and keep you always in his love!