

Breaking Open the Word of Faith

Good News Reflections for the Sundays of December, 2018

by Terry A . Modica



First Sunday of Advent

December 2, 2018

Read:

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Ps 25:4-5, 8-10, 14

1 Thessalonians 3:12-4:2

Luke 21:25-28, 34-36



Holy Spirit. But when we ask Jesus to restore us to a life of faith, we become vigilant, expectant, and aware that we can rely on God to help us in whatever comes our way.

Our tribulations makes us fearful. Faith gives us reasons to hope in Jesus and to live in joy instead of fear. It's not easy! It takes conscious effort. But spiritual drowsiness is a miserable way to live.

Reflect:

Today's world needs Christians who truly understand that faith gives us hope and victory in the midst of any and all difficulties.

Taking this even further, today's world needs Catholics who truly understand that going to Mass means having faith in miracles -- especially the miraculous transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. Are you changed by the presence of Christ in the Eucharist? If so, then after you exit the church, others see evidence of this faith -- right?

There's a difference between "knowing" the truths of our faith and authentically living these truths.

What prayer requests have you made in which you're still waiting for God to provide his help? When you offer them to Jesus during the prayers of Mass, do you feel the hopefulness that comes from faith?

During the consecration of the Eucharist, if we do not have faith in God's ability to change bread and wine into Christ -- an ability that does not rely on the how holy the priest is -- we won't have faith to recognize that Jesus is ministering to us in the Eucharist.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus speaks of his Second Coming, but we can also relate it to our daily lives today. We all have new tribulations looming in the future, unknown and unpredictable. That's life on earth! And Jesus wants to help us through them. Faith in this gives us hope and victory.

However, when our focus is on our troubles instead of on Christ, we are not living in faith. Jesus warned us about our hearts becoming spiritually drowsy. This is when we lose faith. We forget to remain centered in Christ. We neglect to listen for the guidance of the

Questions for Personal Reflection:

- † What are you waiting for from Jesus?
- † How will you use the Season of Advent to grow in faith by noticing the loving, generous, merciful activities of God?

Questions for Faith Sharing:

- † What are your favorite ways to prepare for Christmas?
- † How do you make Advent a season of hope and a time of growing in faith? Share your ideas with the other community members and listen for new ideas that you can adopt.

Comments/Prayer Requests:

Second Sunday of Advent

December 9, 2018

Read:

Baruch 5:1-9
Ps 126:1-6
Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11
Luke 3:1-6



Reflect:

These readings remind us that Advent is a time of spiritual preparation: While we're shopping for gifts, decorating, and sending Christmas cards, what are we doing to make Christmas a new rebirth of Christ for our daily lives?

On Tuesday (December 8th), the Jubilee Year of Mercy begins. The Holy Spirit wants to make our hearts fertile with God's mercy, filling us with a growing awareness of how merciful God is to us when we humbly admit our tendencies to sin. As we grow in holiness this Advent, Jesus will be reborn in us as the Savior of the world, giving his mercy to others through us.

In our responsorial Psalm today, we proclaim: "The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy!" Do you actually feel joyful when you mouth these words? It takes faith to experience joy in the midst of hardships. Faith grows from knowing that the Lord does great things for us because of his mercy -- not because we have earned it, as we'll never be good enough. Repenting from our sins opens us to become aware of this mercy.

Therefore, Saint John the Baptizer is proclaiming to us today: "Prepare the way of the Lord!"

Now is the time to ask: What preparations do I need to make? What am I doing to straighten out the messes in my life, the areas of sin that continually distract me from a close relationship with Christ? What penances will help "make straight" my path?

What depressing or discouraging valley of hardship needs to get filled with the joy of the Lord? If it seems hopeless, what will I do to let Jesus take charge of it?

What mountain of debt or difficult obstacle needs to be made low through faith in the Lord's digging tools?

What's twisted and warped in my thinking, like a road that winds through a jungle of confusion? I pray, Holy Spirit, that you will lead me straight to holiness! What's rough about me? What's edgy and sharp and rubs others the wrong way? Lord Jesus, smooth me like a diamond polisher.

Throughout Advent and the Year of Mercy, let us examine the ways in which we still need to see the salvation of God. Let us make a plan of action to be holier and happier at the end of the Jubilee Year than we are today!

Questions for Personal Reflection:

† Which of the above questions stand out most for you?

† What will you do with this to prepare the way of the Lord so that your holiness grows?

Questions for Faith Sharing:

† Name a tradition you grew up with that prepared you for Christmas. How did this affect your spiritual growth?

† What's your favorite way of preparing for the holy celebration of Christmas? Why?

Comments/Prayer Requests:

Third Sunday of Advent

December 16, 2018

Read:

Zephaniah 3:14-18a

Isaiah 12:2-6

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:10-18



Reflect:

The Third Sunday of Advent focuses our attention on the spirit of joyfulness, because this is an essential mark of true faith in Christ. All of the readings are full of joy and the thrill of happy expectation. In the Gospel reading, John the Baptizer preaches good news to the people, and they are filled with joyful anticipation for whatever God is about to do.

Do you know that joy is a ministry? It's an important way to share the faith. We all have a calling to do this ministry wherever there is misery and hopelessness.

Let's look at how John fulfilled this ministry of joy. We might think he was anything but joyful in his robe of scratchy camels hair and his fiery sermons about repenting from sin. But look closer. His ministry prepared people's hearts to receive Jesus.

Having faith means trusting God which means resting in hope which produces joy. When you or someone you know is lacking joy, it's because Jesus has not yet been invited fully into the situation that's been stealing the joy. It might be too early in the grieving process, which is healthy and normal, or it might be a lack of faith, which needs nurturing.

The ability to experience the joy of faith comes from turning to the love of God and receiving his comfort in the midst of hardships. It also arises from getting to know the joyful side of Jesus and the joyful purposes behind all of his teachings.

Jesus preached going the extra mile, loving our enemies, and doing good to those who cause us hardships, none of which is fun. What we need to discover and then share with others is that holy living, although

not always fun, is what unites us to the joyful love of Jesus and the joyful purposes of everything he preached. Remember, even going to the cross produces joyful results.

The good news is: Jesus didn't just tell us how to be holy, he gave us the power to be holy: He gave us his Holy Spirit. And when others see the Holy Spirit's activity in us, if they know that Jesus is the reason for our joy, they are evangelized by our faith!

Questions for Personal Reflection:

† Think of a recent sin you've committed. How did it prevent you from experiencing joy?

† The next time, how will you rely on the Holy Spirit to help you turn temptation into joy?

Questions for Faith Sharing:

† Name some of the special joys you experience during Advent and Christmas; how do they help you grow stronger in holiness?

† Describe a time when you helped someone else become joyful; how did Jesus reveal himself in that?

Comments/Prayer Requests:

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 23, 2018

Read:

Micah 5:1-4

Ps 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19

Hebrews 10:5-10

Luke 1:39-45



Reflect:

The Fourth Sunday of Advent shows Elizabeth and her unborn son, John, reacting to the nearness of the unborn Christ. We know that Elizabeth immediately understood that Mary was pregnant with the Lord, because the Gospel says she was filled with the Holy Spirit. But how could the fetal John understand? How could he leap for joy while still in the womb?

If it's true that an unborn baby is not a person with a soul until it takes its first breath, as is claimed by many who believe that abortion is okay, how could the unborn John recognize the presence of the unborn Savior?

The faith to recognize the presence of Christ -- in the womb of people's lives, in the Eucharist, in the humanity of unborn children, etc. -- comes from being fully alive in the Holy Spirit, who was given to us fully during our baptisms. However, it takes a humble willingness to let God change our minds about what we think is true in order to be open to God's Spirit teaching us what is indeed true.

John as a fetus was incapable of understanding anything, especially when it happened outside the womb, yet he leapt for joy. This teaches us that we don't need to see God working in the world or solving our personal problems before we can leap for joy. We don't have to understand what God is doing, and we don't even have to know his plans.

The Holy Spirit enlivened the faith of Elizabeth and John through an act of grace that depended on Christ's future activity. For us, our faith is enlivened by the grace God provides in the Sacraments.

The joy that comes from recognizing the presence of Christ is God's Christmas gift to us. It's a joy that's meant to last all year. It's a lifestyle, not a holiday. It comes from a faith that appreciates God for working mercifully in ways that we can see and ways that we cannot see, because we trust in his goodness. Even when we suffer or feel sorrow, we can learn to recognize the presence of Christ.

And then what? Like John, we are called to be heralds of Christ's presence. How? First by sharing our joy with others.

Questions for Personal Reflection:

- † How much is the joy of Christ's Spirit within you affecting your outward life?
- † What will you do this Christmas to become more aware of the Holy Spirit increasing your faith?

Questions for Faith Sharing:

- † Give examples of how the Spirit of Christmas is really the Holy Spirit.
- † What activities have helped you get into the Spirit of Christmas? How has this affected your preparations for celebrating Christmas as a holy day?

Comments/Prayer Requests:

Feast of the Holy Family

December 30, 2018

Read:

Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14 or

1 Samuel 1:20-22, 24-28

Ps 128:1-5 or Ps 84:2-3,5-6,9-10

Col 3:12-21 or 1 John 3:1-2, 21-24

Luke 2:41-52



Without this understanding, however, we have to trust that the words of Jesus are truth. Like Mary and Joseph, we need to ponder in our hearts what we do not understand and at the same time move forward in holy living. Then we discover the joy that comes from a life that's lived wholly in Christ.

Let us pray that Mary and Joseph will help us hear Jesus when our troubles or temptations get so

distracting that we lose sight of him. Let us learn to recognize that Jesus is always present with us in his Holy Spirit, helping us, guiding us, and mercifully loving us, especially in the challenges we face.

Reflect:

"Joy mixed with drama marks the fifth [joyful] mystery," wrote Saint John Paul II in his encyclical on the Rosary, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* (paragraph #20), as he reflected on the Gospel story about Mary and Joseph losing the boy Jesus and finding him in the Temple. This scripture, he pointed out, reveals that Jesus was already wholly dedicated to his Father's affairs. That's the first part of the mystery: How early did he feel inspired to serve as the Son of God?

The second part of the mystery, John Paul II explained, is "the radical nature of the Gospel, in which even the closest of human relationships are challenged by the absolute demands of the Kingdom." Which relationships? Family relationships! In this scripture, Mary and Joseph faced the challenge that every parent experiences. They were "fearful and anxious," because they did not understand what was happening to their child.

Today, we are like Mary and Joseph in their moment of failing to understand the words of Jesus. His teachings challenge us to accept a more difficult life, a life of doing good to our enemies, taking a stand against injustices, standing up for Christian values, getting persecuted for it, turning the cheek and going the extra mile, a life of courageously adhering to the ways of God.

Our preference, when it's inconvenient or unpleasant to be so holy, is to rationalize and make excuses for any behavior that the world says is good and right but which contradicts the Church's scripture-based teachings. However, if we are sincere about following Christ, we are willing to do what is difficult. And it's usually in the doing that we begin to understand the benefits of becoming more like Christ.

Questions for Personal Reflection:

† What teaching of the Church have you rationalized away so that you don't have to obey it? Or what teaching of Christ do you excuse yourself from?

† Assume that your disobedience is due to not understanding what is really being taught. What will you do to seek and gain a better understanding?

Questions for Faith Sharing:

† How meaningful is the Holy Family to you?

† What is it about the relationships between Jesus, Mary and Joseph that appeals to you? What has this taught you about Christian living?

Comments/Prayer Requests: