

St. Mary of the Angels Sunday Advent III C 12/16/18
Zephaniah 3:14-18a; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:10-18

My Brothers and Sisters,

Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete: Be joyful!

We began our liturgy this morning with joyful music: “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel!”

Then, we heard Zephaniah say: “Shout for joy” “Sing joyfully” “Be glad and exult with all your heart” “[The Lord] will rejoice over you with gladness” “He will sing joyfully because of you.”

We responded in the psalm: “Cry out with joy and gladness” “With joy [we] will draw water at the fountain of salvation.”

Then, St. Paul urged the people of Philippi, and us: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice!”

So, we begin with joy and we will end with joy as we will echo in our recessional, “Rejoice in the Lord, Always.”

But, in between, in the Gospel and in this homily, we have a more sober reflection.

As columnist, Nicholas Kristof of the New York Times noted on Thursday: this has been an “incredible week.” And then, he listed all the incredible happenings that we know so well:

Mr. Cohen’s 3 year prison term,
Mr. Trump’s threatening to close down the government,
his difficulty in finding someone to be his chief of staff,
the Mueller investigation coming to its endgame,
and the stock market swinging crazily.

Meanwhile, abroad,
Brexit is tearing England apart,
yellow vest riots are tearing France apart,
Saudi Arabia and Iran are tearing Yemen apart,
and tariffs are tearing the US, Canada and China apart – not to mention how immigration laws are tearing families apart, most tragically, with a seven year old child dying at the border.

Yes, it has been an incredible week of disaster and despair!

In the same week, however, the Church has been celebrating an amazing week of feast days and saints.

On Sunday and Wednesday, we celebrated Juan Diego and Our Lady of Guadalupe. On Tuesday, we commemorated the 50th anniversary of the deaths of Thomas Merton (whom Pope Francis hailed as one of four great American heroes,) and of the great Protestant theologian, Karl Barth.

Then, Thursday was the feast of St. Lucy, patron saint of Sweden and of light, and Friday was the feast day of the profound mystic, St. John of the Cross.

So, it has also been an amazing week of grace and hope!

With so much to ponder in sorrow and with so many to celebrate in joy, I found myself finally narrowing my focus to two figures who speak to us so significantly in this season of Advent and in this most critical time in our nation and world. They are John the Baptist and Thomas Merton. One prophesied in the time of Jesus; the other in our own time.

These two great prophets share two strong similarities and one dissimilarity, all worth talking about.

The first similarity concerns silence and prayer.

John the Baptist and Thomas Merton were both men who moved deeply into silence and prayer, John in the desert at Qumran, Merton in monastic and hermitage life at Gethsemane in Kentucky. Years and years of silence and prayer formed their minds and their hearts.

The second similarity concerns mercy or compassion.

Emerging at last from the desert, John spoke to the crowds that gathered at the Jordan. Once he got their attention with those beautiful passages from Isaiah of last week, and once he got them asking, “What must we do?” John responded concretely and straightforwardly:

to ordinary people: “share your clothes and food with the poor”,

to tax collectors: “stop cheating”, and

to soldiers: “stop your corruption by intimidation.”

John preached a strong message of a mercy that does justice. They go together.

Thomas Merton, one day at Gethsemane, wrote in his journal: “In the loneliness of night and silence a word then pronounced itself: mercy.” That experience began his mission of exposing and challenging the most serious issues of the 1950’s and 60’s: the Vietnam War, Civil Rights, the Cold War, the threat of nuclear annihilation, the search for peace built on equality and justice. Again, a mercy that does justice.

But, now we come to the dissimilarity.

John preached a gospel of judgment and separation. He saw the Messiah as baptizing with the wind and fire of the Spirit. He pictured the Messiah, holding a winnowing fan, tossing people like grain up in the air, letting the wind separate the wheat and the chaff, storing the first and burning the latter. In Matthew’s Gospel, he adds, “Even now the axe lies at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” John spoke with strong images of judgment and separation, of salvation and damnation.

Merton, on the other hand, was drawn beyond separation to oneness. He saw all people as “shining suns.” He had a vision, one day, in Louisville, of suddenly seeing all the people passing by as his brothers and sisters. Mercy and Justice led him, not so much to preaching and proclaiming, (like John) but to conversing and dialoguing with leaders of other Christian denominations and non-Christian faiths. He respected the various ways that all are called to God, brought to God, and led by God. He searched beyond differences to discover unity, the oneness of beings and the oneness of all things in God.

What I want to say is that Merton’s vision of God and of God’s kingdom seems much closer to Jesus’ vision than was John’s vision.

Is this why later in the Gospel, Jesus will say to the crowd, “Amen, I say to you, among those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he?” (Mt. 11.11)

The kingdom of heaven is present and visible right here when people strive to go beyond divisions and differences to find commonality, when people strive to work together toward unity, when people see God, by whatever name, as our common Father, and see all people as brother and sister. I am not sure that John saw that. That is why we, the least, can be greater than John – if we make that effort toward unity.

So, what can we take away from this reflection for the remaining time in Advent and beyond?

First, we do need time for silence and prayer. Visions from God and calls by God take place and are nourished in silence and prayer.

Second, true visions and calls from God always lead to a mercy that does justice.

Thirdly, mercy will bring greater justice as we all try to work together, in dialogue and in action, for the good of all people. There is no place for partisan positions, prejudices or politics in the Kingdom of God.

So, silence and prayer,
A mercy that does justice,
A vision of unity beyond diversity.

In these we will find hope and peace and joy.
Gaudete, my brothers and sisters. Gaudete! Be joyful!
God is Emmanuel! God is with us!

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