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12.2.17 Homily

First Sabbath of Advent

Isa 63:16-17; 64:1-8; Ps 80:2-3,15-16,18-19; 1 Cor 3:1-9; Mark 13:33-37

Elsie Hainz McGrath

As we begin another Season of Advent, we are again struck by the discordant words our Scriptures give to us. Isaiah, for example, having a one-way discourse with God, during which he is primarily playing the “blame game” –*God* it is who is responsible for everything we have done and continue to do *wrong*. We like to pick up on the end of the reading and take solace from it – so beautifully saying that we are all the works of God’s hands. Except -- there is *nothing* in this reading to take solace from. It says, in effect, that God has done a miserable job of molding us – apparently out of spite because we strayed from the proverbial path of righteousness when we had, presumably, at some point, been molded perfectly. But I’d hypothesize that God *never* did do it right, or we would never have lost our way to begin with! And what we see in all this is what we continue to experience in life: if it *isn’t* God’s fault, it’s the devil’s. Or its our parents... or our teachers... or our priests... We continue to refuse to take responsibility for our own actions – except, of course, for those actions we are proud of. And today, even the psalmist is demanding that *God DO something. Make us turn to you.* God forbid we can turn to God under our own power! Only God is all-powerful, capable of saving us or destroying us. On a whim! Sort of like a bad Santa. Or a Donald Trump.

Well, thanks be to God 😊, our Christian Scriptures today are more mellow. In fact, the snippet from Paul’s letter is all super warm and fuzzy feel-good stuff. Like, you know, a letter we might have written – back before the days of instant messaging – that extol a reader’s virtues as an opening, in order to ease the reader into whatever the letter’s *real* point might convey. And the gospel is *on* point -- for what Advent is *really* all about: being awake and alert and ready. Because if we continue to move through life like cloned zombies, more intent on our clipped messages and on what’s wrong with everybody else, than on the real cosmic world that is around us and a part of us, we are absolutely **bound** to miss LIFE! Especially *our* life. Particularly *NEW* life.

To paraphrase some of what Richard Rohr and other modern-day disciples of Teilhard de Chardin are saying, Advent doesn’t mean waiting for Jesus to come and save us or change our world or even bring a lightening strike to wipe out selected areas of Washington DC –though the invasion of the White House mice is tempting to imagine as an innocuous beginning of some divine plague. When we intone our longing for redemption with those plaintive O Antiphons that we’ll be singing throughout Advent, our cry is a universal cry – a cosmic lament of longing for cosmic salvation such as was long ago imagined as a Garden of Eden. It is a movement toward a *way of us* actually *fulfilling* the *cosmic* Christ.

To quote Richard Rohr: *The change that changes everything is the movement away from dualistic thinking and toward non-dualistic consciousness. Our churches have trained us, grounded us, and sent us on this radical mission. We keep one happy foot in Mother Church, but we have something else that we must do and other places that we must also stand. We have no time to walk away from anything. We want to walk toward and alongside.*

Like *my MOST* life-altering religious experience – which I have fully related to you in the past – when I was being subsumed into the body of Jesus while wrestling against him and wailing, “*NO, I’m not you, I’m NOT you!*”

And of course, I’m not. I’m still finding ways to resist. It’s the journey of small steps – 3 forward, 2 back – with occasional quantum leaps along the way. Like **US!** -- breaking a canon law and refusing to buy into a pact that one side terms “excommunication.” Richard Rohr calls it “Emerging Christianity,” and says, “*It’s a change of mind and heart that’s been a long time in coming and now seems to be a new work of the Holy Spirit.*”

It’s the journey of a lifetime.

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Every Advent, we begin again. But never from the same place that we began last year. We are, hopefully, *emerging*. We're closer to the goal. We must not despair, or lose our focus. Stay alert!

And Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to us, O Israel!

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12.16.17 Homily

Third Sabbath of Advent

Isa 61:1-2,10-11; Luke 1:46-50,53-54; 1 Thes 5:16-20; John 1:6-8,19-28

Elsie Hainz McGrath

As we begin this third week of Advent we are but eight short days away from Christmas. Our O Antiphons mark the countdown, those Antiphons we recall in song every week, though *O Emmanuel, come* is actually not the *first* one, but the *last*. And that makes perfect sense, when we give heed to what those beautifully plaintive O Antiphons are all about. They are a concise Salvation History, chronologically arranged.

The first one is addressed: *O Wisdom, come*. Present at the beginning of creation, she is the foundation of awe in God, holiness, and right living. And *her* message to *us* is *Come!* “Come and *see*. Come and *learn* from me. Come and *enjoy* life.” The more we get it wrong, the more we realize what we don’t know. We cry to her to teach us the way of wisdom.

Today, Isaiah recognizes that God’s Wisdom is indeed upon him. Note that these are in fact the very words Jesus quotes when he goes to the synagogue and introduces *himself* as the fulfillment of them. And we heard too the words Mary proclaims when she accepts the burden of bearing and birthing an illegitimate child. Which is to say we *do* grow in wisdom and grace. Or we *should*. We’re not *doomed* to keep getting it wrong.

O Adonai, come, is the second O Antiphon. God has revealed a *divine commune* to Moses, for Adonai *is* plural. (Recall all those “other names” for God, the *Tetragrammaton*, meaning seven, headed up by YHWH. These are not attributes, which go into our *own* definition as our God *Beyond All Names*, but actual names, though they have of course disputed a couple throughout the years. And they also include both singular and plural forms of the same names, like Adon and Adonai for example. And yes, also both masculine and feminine names.) But, back to today... *They* (Adonai) have delivered the law of the land into Moses’ hands, and the law of the land is *Love!* “Love the *land*. Love its *bounty*. Love *everything* and *everyone*. Love *yourself*.” And, yes, we get it wrong. We keep forgetting who we are, *whose* we are. We keep crying out to *Them* to teach us the way of freedom.

The more we get it wrong, the farther away divinity seems to be. In fact, as we follow the strands of our Salvation History, God has distanced themselves, and now seem to only be known through the prophets. Isaiah especially prophesies the restoration of the peace we once knew when David held the throne of power and we were a mighty nation. Now we know only war and pestilence. We cry out for *David* to save us. *O Root of Jesse, come*.

(*Another aside*. Today Paul expressly tells us not to despise prophesying. That’s because far too many of us have pretty much given up on prophets. We’ve given up on ourselves. We do nothing to encourage good prophesies to come about. Or to recognize the prophets among us. Or to even ask questions. Mostly, we’ve settled into varying states of apathy in order to just get along. Yep. Complicity. In our *own* demise. We don’t even know *who* to cry out to anymore!)

But the prophets predict a savior – a human one who will take on the throne of David *and* the saving powers of God. *O Key of David, come*. This fourth O Antiphon is about one who is to come who will be *like* God. And we *all* have our *own* notions of *which One* of that divine commune we’re awaiting!

(Sigh) The prophesies are growing old, the people still suffer, the world is cold and dark and filled with sin, war, death, visages of Trump and reminders of worldwide disasters throughout *all* of human history. We’re ready for warmth and sunshine. We’re sick of despairing, sick of pain and suffering. We cry out for a divine ray of Light to shine its life into our weary hearts. *O Radiant Dawn, come*.

John the Baptist prophesies such a Light today. Today’s translation and its selected verses leave out the line that goes “He will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire” – but we *heard* it even though it wasn’t there, *didn’t* we? And it goes *right back to the beginning*, doesn’t it? To *today’s* O Antiphon. Sophia... Wisdom... seeing in *awe* and learning *holiness* and living *fully*.

So what Antiphon *does* come next? *O Keystone, come*. Perhaps the prophets were right. Perhaps the *one* who is to come *will* bind up *all* wounds, be the cornerstone that unites *all* people, fulfill the desire of *all* the nations, *save* the very creation itself. Like Adonai, in the second O Antiphon, the *Plurality of God* who *imparted unto us* the blueprint – the law

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of right living – and worked awesome deeds in order to save us... in *our* holiness... so *we* can *continue to become* those sparks of godliness that *we* are *called to be*.

But *then* what comes next? Right – we get it wrong! Remember where we began *this* Season of Advent? Remember *why* we do this every year?

*O come, O come, Emmanuel! ... **And...** Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to us, O Israel!*

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12.23.17 Homily

Fourth Sunday of Advent

2 Sam 7:1-5,8-11,16; Ps 89:2-5,27,29; Rom 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

Elsie Hainz McGrath

So Mary says YES. That is the purpose of Advent... getting from where we were to where we are to where we are going by saying YES to the improbable, implausible and the absolutely impossible. Not necessarily bravely, like fearless and heroic and all that rah-rah stuff. Absolutely not certain, like having all the answers and confident in the outcome. But not defeated either, like wringing of hands and shrugging of shoulders "what else can I do?" implacable stuff. Just YES. In blind faith.

And what's the end result of Mary's YES? The angel flat out leaves her! She's left alone, and in the dark, both figuratively and actually, to live with her decision!

This is Luke's Annunciation account. Remember how Lent begins when we are reading Luke's Temptation account? Jesus is dying in the desert, 40 days and nights into a trip from hell and now having hallucinations of a companion who is tempting him with downright devilish ways of escaping his fate! Jesus gives the proper answers, which in his case is NO. *That* is the purpose of Lent... getting from where we were to where we are to where we are going by saying NO to the impotent, impractical and downright imprecatory. In blind faith.

And what's the end result of Jesus' NO? The devil leaves *until an opportune time* presents itself for dangling those tempting choices before him again. Jesus is out of the dark for the moment, but he is *never* freed from making decisions.

Neither, of course, is Mary... freed from making decisions. But the crux of the story of Mary's Annunciation is a little weightier than is the crux of the story of the Jesus' Temptations insofar as now she's pregnant, for God's sake! What *are* our choices when we find ourselves pregnant? We birth new life. Or we kill it.

There was fear. There was doubt. But ultimately, there was acceptance. Mary promised to birth... *wherever* this life might have come from and *whatever* this life might become.

Because NO, God would not live in a house such as David wanted to erect. Not any more than God ever lived in the Ark of the Covenant. Nor in any golden tabernacle either. God lived *with* David. God lived *with* the people who wandered in the desert. God lives *with* those who kneel before such expensive artisan works. It is *God* who is the potter, as we heard again when this Advent began. And God works with clay, the clay of the Earth's surface. And fire, the fire of the stars radiance. And souls, the souls of the just and of the unjust. God works with **life**.

So as we swiftly speed into that magical day of Christmas, it behooves us to spend a moment with Paul's very short homily from today. Because Paul does not promise us anything beyond what comes with faith. In this brief ending of his letter to the people of Rome, people Paul has not even *met* yet, he simply says that *God is indeed with them*; that they are *equally* loved and have *equal* access to all that is known of God, and to all that was taught by Jesus. That there are *no* separations, there is *no* secret knowledge, and *no* one has a home or a church or a nation into which *all* are *not* welcome.

The Fourth Sunday of Advent is about waiting in Love. In other words, waiting in God. Seems there are no shortcuts. And it's always dark before the light.

As T.S. Eliot wrote in *East Coker*:

O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark. ...I said to my soul, be still, and let dark come upon you which shall be the darkness of God. ... I said to my soul, be still and wait without hope, for hope would be for the wrong thing. Wait without love, for love would be love of the wrong thing. There is yet faith. But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting. Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought. So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing. ...Not lost, but requiring, pointing, to the agony of death and rebirth. ...In order to arrive there, to arrive where you are, to get from where you are not, you must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy. ...You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance, ...of dispossession.

...Home is where one starts from. ...In my end is my beginning.

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The Incarnation is about to happen... again... for the very first time. The Incarnation is a never-ending story of new life. And new life is *always* a miracle.

O come, Emmanuel, and set us free from all that robs us of life.

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12.30.17 Homily

Holy Family

Sir 3:2-6,12-14; Ps 128:1-5; Col 3:12-17; Luke 2:22-40

Elsie Hainz McGrath

We are blessed with a few Old Testament books that our Jewish friends never hear from – like the Book of Sirach, sometimes called Ecclesiasticus. That is because Sirach, and a handful of others in our Bible, were written in Greek, and when the Jews decided to establish a canon near the end of the first century CE, they determined that only texts written in Hebrew were truly of God because Hebrew was God's language. Sirach, and those other Greek texts, were late BCE writings, all within the last 200-300 years before the birth of Jesus, and they hold a wealth of wisdom. Our Protestant friends never hear these texts either, having opted to oust them when they began assembling their own Bibles following the Reformation because they followed the example of the Jews in seeing them as unauthentically inspired. So Catholics are the only ones hearing this reading from Sirach in their places of worship this weekend.

(And that is even though, as Catholics, we *know* that God's language was really Latin. Except, it seems the language of our founder, Jesus, was Aramaic. Ironic too, there have been fragments of some of those Greek writings discovered in recent years that are in Hebrew, and that actually predate the Greek translations that the Jews were aware of at the time they established their canon.)

Sirach's is a sermon on being good to our parents, not because they deserve it but just because they are our parents. *That is reason enough.* Ideally, it was their love for one another that brought us into the world, or at least into the family unit. And their *human* love shines through *us*.

The anonymous letter to the Colossians is poetry for all people – holy, chosen and beloved not because we deserve it but just because we are God's. *That is reason enough.* God's love for us brought us into being, as children of our natural and/or adoptive parents. And God's *divine* love shines through *us*.

The Lukan presentation story is instruction for all families. Know our roots and follow our rites, not because we'll be punished if we don't but because we'll be blessed if we do. *That is reason enough.* Bringing our love for one another and our love for our children into the larger family of a spiritual community with like-minded rituals and beliefs gives us common ground, mutual support and even larger love. And that *communal* love shines through *us*.

This is a great precursor to our upcoming celebration of Epiphany, a great introduction to that wondrous story of the Newborn Star, a great reminder that we all have celestial roots and our own light to guide the way for others even as we follow the light of those who came before us. The lesson of the Holy Family for us, on the cusp of the year 2018, is the same as it has *ever* been- for *all* generations: we are all holy, and we are all family.

A prelude for next week's Twelfth Day of Christmas. Sweet Honey in the Rock sings it sweetly. I *can't*, of course! But I *can* read the words, scripture for all ages:

*For each Child that's born a morning star rises
and sings to the universe who we are.
We are our Grandmothers' prayers.
We are our Grandfathers' dreamings.
We are the breath of our Ancestors.
We are the Spirit of God.
We are Mothers of courage and Fathers of time;
Daughters of dust and Sons of great vision.
We are Sisters of mercy and Brothers of love;
Lovers of life and Builders of nations.
We are Seekers of truth and Keepers of faith,
Makers of peace and Wisdom of ages.
We are one.*

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