Second Sunday of Advent

Whether we take Baruch’s message today as God’s message of hope to those who were in exile, or see it as a way the exiles named God’s saving help upon their return, or we recognize that this is a timeless message about who God is, and how God’s love leads folks from whatever experience of exile into freedom, one thing is clear: our first reading today is Good News! Really Good News about God’s love. God always has in mind an offer of forgiveness, or mercy; redemption. God is always inviting us into a dramatic change of fortune – very good news indeed!

Then in our second reading, St. Paul’s joy practically spills out over us. I pray with joy for you ... God will complete the good work begun in you .... May your love abound more and more ... Amen Paul! He offers us very uplifting words, and with the terrorism here and abroad, and all the tragedies that we see each day, I sure am open to something uplifting! Just seeing the love Paul has for the community in Philippi, and the love that is possible with Christian community is powerfully encouraging.

But our Gospel starts out rather strangely today. It is almost like some official government document, or something taken from a dry history book: “In the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, Philip of Ituraea & Trachonitis etc ..” What’s that all about? Was Luke having trouble getting started? Hardly seems the inspiration for the best Advent ever.

But there is more than meets the eye. First, Luke is a very gifted writer. He can draw us into a scene with the best of them. But he also had a comprehensive plan, one book to introduce us to Jesus and provide what we need to know about his life, death and resurrection, a second volume to help us see how Christ continued to be present, drawing communities together as disciples, as the church spread throughout the world (in Acts of the Apostles). So all that historical information in today’s Gospel is important. Having begun his Gospel by saying he had decided to investigate everything, and then give an orderly account of all that happened when Jesus came into the world, here Luke is providing the basic details. “This is the history, you can check it out.” Our faith isn’t based on myths, a once upon a time kind of thing. Jesus was a real person who lived and breathed; here is who was who at the time.

But there is a much more significant reason for telling us about the leadership in place at the time of John the Baptist’s ministry. At the heart of Luke’s message is the mercy of God; forgiveness, healing, redemption, salvation. Where do we encounter God’s mercy and forgiving love? Where do we experience healing and new life? Where and when does salvation come? Mercy, redemption, salvation are not some distant promise, Good News to experience far in the future, while we just muddle through in the meantime. God’s mercy is encountered in time, in the present, the here and now. We begin to taste mercy, forgiveness, transformation, new life in the here and now. True, there is a final consummation. But the beginning of God’s grace changing us is available each and every day.

Jesus was born in time, revealing how God enters into the human story. People living during the reign of Tiberius, Herod and his relatives all could experience Jesus, and God’s love, the
beginning of the Kingdom breaking in, in their daily life, if they would only accept it. We, who take all of Luke’s message to heart, can experience mercy, forgiveness, healing, salvation here and now.

While Baruch may have been looking to the future, the joy that spills out of Paul’s letter to the Philippians was a joy he tasted in his soul every time he prayed for that community. His confidence? That was not a hope for Paul, he experienced it, even in jail, when awaiting trial. He had experienced the support of the community of believers at Philippi, and also experienced Christ lifting him up, sustaining him in all manner of trials.

Knowing Christ changes everything from the first day we decide to follow him. Through Christ we are born into a new family. That is the partnership in the Gospel that brings Paul such joy. We have Christ ever with us, we have a family wherever we go. We have a place to go with our prayers, our concerns, our trials, the things that confuse or overwhelm us: we can turn them over to the Lord. We can ask brothers and sisters in faith to pray for us. Then we can experience how our relationship with Jesus, and the power of prayer makes a difference in the here and now. We discover that if we invite God in, give God a chance, then just as John the Baptist proclaimed, the Lord come and fill in the valleys in our lives, lower the mountains than seem insurmountable, provide a path for us that leads to our ultimate destiny, to salvation.

Every year in Advent, we revisit the beautiful inspirations of the prophets. We let John the Baptist’s words ring out again. We do our best to look for God’s mercy and saving power, to recognize God’s grace at work, so that we can be thankful and celebrate it. All that prepares us to celebrate Christmas with gratitude and joy.

This year, a Jubilee Year and Year of Mercy, we are invited to look more closely at God’s mercy offered to us, given to us, poured out upon us. Experiencing mercy, we become equipped to share mercy, to be merciful, to do the work of God through mercy. The Year of Mercy begins this week with the Holy Day, the feast of the Immaculate Conception. Our Mass schedule is in the Bulletin.

Next weekend after all the Masses we are all invited to take a mini pilgrimage, a walk of mercy in the Gym. Come prepared to enter a peaceful, prayerful moment of mercy. In this hectic time, when there are so many things that tire us, and others that sap our joy, a quiet walk of mercy may be just what the doctor ordered. (The spiritual doctor.)

The Year of Mercy truly holds out a rich opportunity for us. Here is one thing I plan to do. In addition to participating in the walk of mercy, and other events as they unfold throughout the year, I’m going to try to put into practice something that came to me as I was looking at one of my habits. You may notice that sometimes at Mass, I put my glasses on, I take them off, I put them back on. That may not change, but I am going to do my best to keep one pair of glasses on all year long. This coming year I’m going to do my best to look at everything through the lens of God’s mercy. When looking at my own shortcomings, rather than obsess about how slow change comes, I’ll try to see the little growth and transformation God makes possible, sees, and blesses. Likewise looking at others, I’ll do my best to see them through the lens of God’s mercy. Looking at all that is wrong in the world, I keep those glasses on, seeing how many more good people
there are in the world than the evil ones, who cause such suffering and mayhem. I’m going to do my best to see where the seeds of mercy are planted, be thankful for them, and see if I can tend them in any way. I’ll try to set my heart on a harvest of mercy.

I haven’t said a great deal about our second reading yet, but I do identify with it deeply. I can really connect with Paul’s joy about partnership in the Gospel, because I experience that same joy here. You grew Saints Place into the wonderful ministry it is, doing such tremendous good for refugees who come here. I find great joy in being able to partner with you in that ministry. Don’t forget the Angel Trees! The School has been a ministry of this parish for almost a century, and I find such joy in being a partner in that enterprise, teaching not just the basics, but forming Christian community and helping the children come to know Jesus, and to have a solid foundation in faith. There is a school Mass at 9:10 on the Holy Day; please consider yourself invited. St Louis has entered into partnership with Fr. Rick and his work in Haiti. To share in that partnership is a blessing. Remember the ornament sale this weekend, a part of that partnership in the Gospel. The pastoral care ministries, faith formation ministries, liturgical ministries: being able to partner in the wonderful work of this parish does bring a tremendous joy to me. I hope and pray you find joy in that partnership as well. And so with St Paul, I pray with joy for you, and relish the partnership we share in the Gospel.