December 20, 2015
4th Sunday of Advent – “Being a Joyful Missionary of Mercy”
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Reading 1 Micah 5:1-4a
Thus says the LORD: You, Bethlehem-Ephrathah too small to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel; whose origin is from of old, from ancient times. Therefore the Lord will give them up, until the time when she who is to give birth has borne, and the rest of his kindred shall return to the children of Israel. He shall stand firm and shepherd his flock by the strength of the LORD, in the majestic name of the LORD, his God; and they shall remain, for now his greatness shall reach to the ends of the earth; he shall be peace.

Reading 2 Hebrews 10:5-10
Brothers and sisters: When Christ came into the world, he said: “Sacrifices and offerings, holocausts and sin offerings, you neither desired nor delighted in.” These are offered according to the law. Then he says, “Behold, I come to do your will.” He takes away the first to establish the second. By this “will,” we have been consecrated through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice and said, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled.”

HOMILY
My wife and I get to babysit our grandchildren from Maryland each summer for about a week, and we try to do fun things with them locally. A few years ago, the first year we actually did this, the grandchildren ranged in age from just under 3 to 9 years of age. The not-quite-3-year-old went in for a nap on the first day, while her Mom and Dad left to go back home, and Barb and I prepared for the awakening moment and what could happen. When our granddaughter woke up, Barb had to go and tend to some “I want Mommy” and “I want Daddy” sobbing for a while. Then, we watched her walk down the stairs from the bedroom and look around. We asked her what she was doing and without a moment’s hesitation, she put her shoes on, went to the front door and said in a very resolute voice, “I’m going.” We asked where and she just as quickly responded, “I’m going, I want Mommy and Daddy.” Now, there was a determined young lady, who reviewed the situation and knew what she had to do, and started to do it. As the Nike commercial says, “Just do it,” and our almost-3-year-old was determined enough and confident enough to pursue what she thought needed to be done. Hold on, there’s a point to that nice, simple story.

Well, changing the subject for a bit, I have some not-so-good news, some better news, and some really great news. First of all, the not-so-good news: if you are hoping for a white Christmas, well, maybe next year. Some better news: if you haven’t started shopping yet, you still have a few shopping days left, and you have company – me. The really great news: of course, we celebrate the
birth of Christ this upcoming week and the holyday joy that Pope Francis calls each of us to share with others. But, also, the Jubilee Year of Mercy began a little over a week ago, and if you haven’t started participating yet, you still have about 337 days left. Now, how many went to the St. Louis school gym area last weekend and enjoyed the serenity and calm that could be experienced on the Walk of Mercy? I heard that even with the great rush of young children after the 9 o’clock Mass, it was quiet enough that adults and teens could still enjoy a peaceful time to read the notecards on the walk and reflect on them – 8 cards in a progression that told of God’s gift of mercy and God’s request for us to share that mercy with others in our lives – it was truly a remarkable event that touched many hearts! And, that whole idea began when one St. Louis parishioner knew of a similar event, and then adapted it to our particular setting and needs. One determined parishioner, who reviewed the situation, knew what she had to do, and … just did it!

If we take another look at today’s Gospel reading from Luke, on the surface it seems like a very simple story, one which nicely fits into our overall Advent theme of preparing for the coming of Christ – just a simple, nice story about Mary going to visit her relative, Elizabeth. But, the story behind the story, well … that’s what Paul Harvey would have called the rest of the story. Mary had just heard the miraculous news from the angel Gabriel about both her and Elizabeth being pregnant – but miraculous because of entirely different circumstances: Mary had not known man, and Elizabeth was elderly and barren, evidently well past her child-bearing years. In this simple, nice story, there is so much going on, so much mercy, so much hope, so much humility, so much faith, and of course, so much love. It’s like a complete one-act play, with 3 central characters, each welcoming our Lord in a different way, each playing a pivotal role in salvation history. Our focus today is on Mary, drawing on the others as needed to complete the picture, and then shifting over to us, and how the readings apply to us in today’s world.

Right in today’s opening line, Mary traveled “in haste” to go and see Elizabeth, and this follows immediately after Gabriel left her. Now, this was no ordinary walk-around-the-block trip to make an afternoon social call. Elizabeth’s husband, Zechariah, was a temple priest in Jerusalem, so the distance between Mary’s and Elizabeth’s homes was about 85 miles, and considering that it was in the so-called hill country, that would have meant a 5-6 day journey … one way. Being a young teen, and probably aware of the dangers involved with such a tough and perilous journey, Mary must have prepared for it, and I can almost envision her as she … reviewed the situation, knew what she had to do, and just did it! Mary’s visit was one of joy and mercy towards Elizabeth. Joy – she was carrying the Christ child, very early in the first trimester – after all, Jesus had only been conceived a few weeks before, at most – and she wanted to share the joy of that news with the joy of Elizabeth’s news. Carrying Jesus, Mary was bringing great news to Elizabeth, who received it with gratitude, humility and faith. And Luke records John’s reaction as well, as Elizabeth said to Mary, “at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy.” Certainly, a joy-filled reception all around! And mercy? … A verse later in Luke says that Mary stayed with Elizabeth for 3 months, so she left either just before John was born or shortly afterwards. Mary unselfishly traveled to Elizabeth to also tend to her in her final months of pregnancy, especially in consideration of Elizabeth’s age. Truly an act of mercy, while carrying Jesus – sharing God’s merciful love with others. Mercy and joy – what a wonderful combination fully shown by this seemingly nice … simple … story.

Throughout the remainder of this holiday season, we will all have opportunities to witness, express and share God’s merciful love. Some may not necessarily be particularly joyful, but Pope Francis notes that we should try to not be overcome by sadness, but should fill our hearts with joy with
the coming of Our Lord, and to go out and proclaim to others the joy of God’s mercy, to be generous and self-giving missionaries of mercy, much like Mary did with Elizabeth.

And so, I’d like to leave you with the following suggestions:

1) During the remaining days of this Advent Season and throughout the Christmas Season … indeed, throughout the remainder of this glorious Jubilee Year of Mercy, called by Pope Francis and ending next November 20th, I encourage you to get to know the 7 corporal and 7 spiritual works of mercy that are recognized and promoted by the Church. Look around you, check the bulletin, for all of the various activities that are supported by St. Louis parishioners, many of them initiated by St Louis parishioners as acts of merciful love – Saint’s Place for refugees from Nepal, Burma, Sudan and other war-torn countries … St. Damien Pediatric Hospital for the children in Haiti … Pittsford Food Cupboard, for local members of the community who are suffering … and many, many others – all started by people who reviewed the situation, knew what to do, and just did it, all to share God’s merciful love with others.

2) I encourage you, this evening, to take out your bible or your At Home with the Word book, and read this Gospel passage again, look beyond the nice, simple story and see how the messages contained in it can apply to your own life’s circumstances. Try to do this each week, and I guarantee you will notice a difference in the way you live your life and the way you treat others.

3) In this great nation of ours, we have a real opportunity to make a difference in the course we follow at home and in the world with next year’s primary and general elections. Try to look behind the hyperbole and political games that often consume the news and headlines, and understand what positions and issues are really at stake. Consider the rights of the yet-to-be-born, at all stages of pregnancy, and the rights of the elderly, the suffering. Consider the plight of the poor, the immigrant, the migrant, the refugee, the mother-to-be … and yes, even the prisoner. As John in the womb recognized Jesus through Mary’s voice, recognize Our Lord in everyone else.

4) Like Mary, become a Christ-bearer – try to improve your relationship with Christ to more effectively carry Him to others. Through Baptism, and by prayer and frequent reception of the Eucharist, we can better carry His message of love.

Above all, and in summary, throughout the next year, if you see opportunities where you can share God’s merciful love with others, review the situation, figure out what to do, and, for the sake of God’s people, try to make sure it gets done! Through each act of mercy you perform, by your generosity and self-sacrifice, become a joyful missionary of mercy!