

HOMILY FOR THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Sunday, 5 December 2021

- Fr. Jim Fredericks

Part One: the readings for the day

Part Two: reflection on the readings

Part Three: guidelines for *lectio divina*

PART ONE: READINGS FOR THE DAY

Lectionary: 6

Reading I Bar 5:1-9

Jerusalem, take off your robe of mourning and misery;

put on the splendor of glory from God forever:

wrapped in the cloak of justice from God,

bear on your head the mitre

that displays the glory of the eternal name.

For God will show all the earth your splendor:

you will be named by God forever

the peace of justice, the glory of God's worship.

Up, Jerusalem! stand upon the heights;

look to the east and see your children

gathered from the east and the west

at the word of the Holy One,

rejoicing that they are remembered by God.

Led away on foot by their enemies they left you:

but God will bring them back to you

borne aloft in glory as on royal thrones.

For God has commanded

that every lofty mountain be made low,

and that the age-old depths and gorges

be filled to level ground,

that Israel may advance secure in the glory of God.

The forests and every fragrant kind of tree

have overshadowed Israel at God's command;

for God is leading Israel in joy

by the light of his glory,

with his mercy and justice for company.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 126:1-2, 2-3, 4-5, 6.

R. (3) The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.
When the LORD brought back the captives of Zion,
we were like men dreaming.

Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with rejoicing.

R. The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.
Then they said among the nations,
"The LORD has done great things for them."

The LORD has done great things for us;
we are glad indeed.

R. The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.
Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the torrents in the southern desert.

Those who sow in tears
shall reap rejoicing.

R. The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.
Although they go forth weeping,
carrying the seed to be sown,
They shall come back rejoicing,
carrying their sheaves.

R. The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.

Reading II Phil 1:4-6, 8-11

Brothers and sisters:

I pray always with joy in my every prayer for all of you,
because of your partnership for the gospel
from the first day until now.

I am confident of this,
that the one who began a good work in you
will continue to complete it
until the day of Christ Jesus.

God is my witness,
how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

And this is my prayer:

that your love may increase ever more and more
in knowledge and every kind of perception,
to discern what is of value,
so that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,
filled with the fruit of righteousness
that comes through Jesus Christ
for the glory and praise of God.

Alleluia Lk 3:4, 6

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths:
all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Lk 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar,
when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea,
and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee,
and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region
of Ituraea and Trachonitis,
and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene,
during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas,
the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert.
John went throughout the whole region of the Jordan,
proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,
as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah:

A voice of one crying out in the desert:

*"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight his paths.*

Every valley shall be filled

and every mountain and hill shall be made low.

The winding roads shall be made straight,

and the rough ways made smooth,

and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

PART TWO: HOMILY ON THE READINGS

Today is the Second Sunday of Advent and I want to sing
the praises of all those people among us who are "a voice
of one crying out in the desert."

In particular, I want to tell you about Ms. June Meese.

June Meese was my fourth-grade teacher. We called her
"Miss Meese" in those days. I sing her praises this Advent
because I can say literally and without exaggeration that
June Meese taught me how to read. In doing so, she will
forever be, for me at least,

"a voice of one crying out in the desert."

I struggled with “learning disabilities” as a child and I still struggle them as an adult. When I was in grammar school, we didn’t know very much about such things. In my first years in school, I remember the teacher writing a word on the board and hands going up all around me. My classmates would shout out the word the teacher had written.

But not me.

How could my classmates look at those squiggles and then, seemingly without any effort at all, come up with a word.? I was baffled and frightened.

My parents could not have been more responsible. I sat on my dad’s lap night after night with a phonics book full of senseless puzzles I could never figure out: pronounce “th” paired with “e” and then paired with “o” and then with “i.” My tears fell from my cheeks onto the table as I leaned over this demonic book. (It was an ugly gray). I can’t believe how patient my dad was. With equal patience, my mom would write words I had misspelled on a piece of paper.

“t-a-b-l-e” - not “t-a-b-e-l.”

Can’t you see the difference?

Well, of course I could see the difference. What I just couldn’t see was which of the two was spelled correctly.

School became a dangerous place for me. At any moment, a teacher could mark up the blackboard with her chalk and demand that I come up with a word. I had lots of friends and I don’t remember anyone calling me stupid, but I knew that something fundamental was separating me from them. All my friends could look at the squiggles on the blackboard and call out the right word. How could they do this? What was their secret? What was wrong with me?

Without a doubt, I can say this was the loneliest time in my entire life, and with a dread only a child can know, I entered the fourth grade.

Miss Meese frightened me at first. She came looming out of the stratosphere into my little, well-defended inner kingdom of childhood imagination and said,

“Well, Jim, now that you are in fourth grade, I think it is time we started to read.”

She told me that she would give me special lessons every day after school. Just the two of us.

And this is exactly what she did.

Like my parents, June Meese was endlessly patient.

“Try it again, Jim, you almost have it. Sound it out.”

Sometimes Miss Meese would write the word in a sentence using words I already knew, which made it easy to guess what the difficult word was. I still marvel at this kindness. She gave me special attention after class for an entire year.

I didn't fully understand it at the time, but I was falling in love. I was certainly in love with Miss Meese, but I also was falling in love with all those words she was teaching me. They were like a bridge spanning the great chasm between my inner world and the world beyond. I began to love words, even as I still hated spelling.

I still love words. (Of course, I still hate spelling too).

So,

... in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas...

June Meese appeared to me in the midst of my desert.

She was like John the Baptist:

A voice of one crying out in the desert

And this voice crying out in my desert was telling me that what I had come to assume was impossible was, in fact, going to happen: the day would come when I would read.

In announcing the coming of the Messiah, the Prophet Isaiah wrote that the impossible would come to be:

*“Every valley shall be filled
and every mountain and hill shall be made low.
The winding roads shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth,
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”*

And Miss Meese was saying pretty much the same thing: One day, I was going to be able to read.

Sometime after my studies with June Meese, I became a college professor. (I'm leaving out some of the details of my life story). As a college prof, I had a habit of stopping in at the library on my campus in order to watch the students working in their carrels.

(C-a-r-r-e-l ... I had to look it up).

Watching a young person absorbed in a book still brings out deep feelings in me.

I would look at the college students and think, with great emotion, that what is impossible was becoming possible. The great mountains and the deep ravines that separate us from one another were being leveled. The winding roads were being made straight and the rough ways made smooth.

Isaiah the Prophet got it right about the coming of the Messiah.

We are living in a lonely time. Many of us are in a desert of isolation. This is certainly true because of COVID, but there are other reasons for our loneliness as well. The world needs its John the Baptist this Advent.

June Meese was my John the Baptist.

A voice of one crying out in the desert

And she did not just teach me how to read. June Meese taught me to go out and accompany others as they discover that the impossible is becoming possible.

So, as we make our way through Advent toward the birth of the Christ Child, please remember Miss Meese, my fourth-grade teacher. She stayed after school with me and, with infinite patience, taught me how to read. My life has been utterly transformed by her kindness.

I'll bet you have a "Miss Meese" too.

The world is full of paths that are not straight, valleys too deep to cross and mountains too high to climb. The world is full of indecipherable squiggles that just can't be read. There is much too much loneliness in this world. As we draw near to Christmas, dedicate yourself to becoming a voice that prepares the way of the Lord so that, someday,

all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

PART THREE: INSTRUCTIONS FOR *LECTIO DIVINA*

I suggest that you use the readings and my reflections as an opportunity for practicing *lectio divina* ("divine reading"). This is an ancient spiritual practice that started with the great monks in the Syrian and Egyptian desert back in the early days of the Church. It is really quite simple.

Step one: calm your mind (my Buddhist friends describe the mind as "a mango-tree full of chattering monkeys"). I find that paying attention to your breath for a few minutes is a practical and effective way to do this.

Step two: read the readings slowly and attentively. Savor the words as if you were tasting a great Pinot Noir. Don't rush. You are not looking for information or instructions. You are making friends with a sacred text which will bless you abundantly if you will only open your heart to it and let it speak to you. In *lectio divina*, we are not actually "reading" the Bible. Rather, we are "listening" to the Bible as the sacred words speak to us.

Step three: repeat step two.

Step four: read the reflection on the readings.

Step five: Ask yourself a few questions:

- What particular words in the readings call out to me most forcefully?
- What is going on in my life such that these words call to me so forthrightly?
- How am I being asked to change, both interiorly and exteriorly?
- In light of this *lectio divina*, how am I being invited to be of service to the world today?