

2nd Sunday of Advent “Worldly Fears and the Light of Christ”

Fr. Frank Schuster

In South Dakota, there is a vast stretch of plains that scientists tell us used to be an inland ocean. If there were human beings 70 million years ago, someone could have sat on the shore of this ocean feeling like the ocean was pretty permanent. Now, only scientists can point to the evidence that there used to be an ocean there. On the western side of South Dakota are the Bad Lands. They say the Bad Lands used to be a mountain range that eroded into what we see there today. We can look at Mount Rainier or Mount Baker as if they are pretty permanent, but they are not. Mt. St. Helens can attest to this. As the scriptures say, the mountains will be made low. And scientists can point to where this has happened. Cosmologists and scientists meanwhile talk about how the universe began with a big bang. They also talk about how the universe will either fade away one day as the last stars lose energy, or perhaps one day the universe will shrink again to what they call the big crunch billions of years from now. Long before that happens, maybe in a billion years or so, our own sun will expand and our atmosphere on this planet will burn away. And it doesn't seem like a day goes by without some scientific report from a university or group of scientists telling us that if we don't do something about climate change civilization could end up doomed a lot sooner, maybe in a matter of decades or centuries. The point is, there will come a day in the future when everything that humanity had built on this planet will be destroyed forever.

What a “Debbie Downer”! These are not happy thoughts and if we think about these things too much we can be led to a dark and hopeless place. I think most of us would much rather defy the darkness in our world by decorating our houses with Christmas lights, sing carols, and combat the gloominess of the world with the decision to be joyful, despite every reason to be concerned. And there is something healthy about that, something right about that if we understand why we do it. During the season of Advent, the Church asks that we take some time before Christmas to reflect on the darkness in the world around us so to understand why we keep vigil for Christ our light. He is our only hope for this world and the next.

You see, sacred scripture sometimes asks us to reflect on the finitude and futility of the world in which we live so to invite us to look higher, to look beyond what is created and look to the Creator, who alone is eternal. Our faith in God gives us meaning to everything we do and every choice we make. Rather than seeing our lives as an exercise in existential futility, we live our lives as a people of Advent, a people who keep vigil, who look forward to the Lord's return in glory. Only the love of God can give us perspective on the decisions we make and draw us beyond the fading of this world to what Revelation calls a new heaven and a new earth. As the world gets darker and darker, the Gospel offers us a light to shine our way. And this good news has an impact on how we take care of the world around us so to be better stewards of what is entrusted to us in this life.

In the moments when we are fearful about the future, St. Paul gives us good advice in our second reading. He says, “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.” During Advent, as we make out our Christmas lists and manically run around trying to get everything we need to do accomplished, there is something very wise about stepping back and asking ourselves, what really has value in this life?

St. John the Baptist’s ministry was exactly about that, to awaken in people a new perspective of what has value in life. We are journeying with the Gospel of St. Luke. Bishop Barron likes to talk about how Luke has this wonderful joke for us in the Gospel reading we have today and it is a commentary on what God values. It is the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod was the tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas. These people were “who’s who” in Jesus’ day. If you were powerful or wanted to be powerful you would want to be near or be friends with these people. So ask yourself who does God send his revelation to? None of them! Not to Caesar, not to Herod, not to someone living in a castle or mansion, not to someone wealthy or famous, God sends his revelation to some man named John who wore camel hair and ate locusts. Great leaders come and go. Kingdoms through the centuries have risen and fallen. Therefore, John is the one to whom the word of God comes. You see, John didn’t value mansions or possessions. John valued his relationship with God above everything else...and so should we.

At the end of time, it does not matter if we live in mansions or live in tents, it does not matter what accomplishments we achieve or how expensive our car is. It doesn’t matter how many gifts we have under the Christmas tree. At the end of time this all will turn to dust. What matters is did we live our lives in right relationship with God, in the manner we love God, family and neighbor? Were we faithful disciples of Jesus who alone can help us transcend the futility of this world to the permanence of the next? Since we only have so much time during the course of this life, are we filling it with what matters most or are we settling for lesser treasure?

And so, we have lit the second candle. We are invited again this Sunday to keep vigil for the Messiah. We wait in hope for salvation that can only come through Christ our Lord. We live as people of the Kingdom of God by preparing in this life for what matters most in the next. We go so far as to pray the ancient prayer, maranatha! Come Lord Jesus! Please Lord come soon, and renew the face of the earth!