

2ND SUNDAY OF ADVENT - A

“Get real!”

There is a big difference between “make believe” and “belief.” Advent is a season when it is easy to get them mixed up. On the one hand, we are preparing for the birth of Jesus, knowing that he is already born, so we sort of “make believe” he will be born on December 25th. I’m ignoring all those Christmas stories about things like the Grinch who stole Christmas, Frosty the Snowman and Rudolf who saved the day for Santa. By the way, did it even dawn on you just how un-Christian that story is? The poor little reindeer was shunned by the other reindeer because he had a shiny nose.

(Those of us with big noses notice things like this.) Because he was different, he was discriminated against, and as far as I can tell from the story line, it was perfectly okay. For little Rudy to be accepted by the rest of the herd, he had to become a hero, and only then, after he led Santa’s sleigh through the fog, did the other reindeer love him. The message: Love is something you earn. How un-Christian is that? Love is God’s gift to us! We can’t earn it! It is total gift! Now don’t forget it! Where was I? Oh yea.

On the other hand, the Church gives us John the Baptist to bring us out of the fog, as he tells us to get real. Advent is not a time for make-believe, but a time for real faith. As we were reading over this Gospel passage at our staff meeting this week, I picked up on the urgency of the Baptist’s message; *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”* For some reason, I heard in my head the song *Something’s Coming* from the Broadway musical **West Side Story**. *(sing)*

*Could it be? Yes it could. Something’s coming, something good.
If I can wait!
Something’s coming, I don’t know what it is,
But it is...Gonna be great!*

Now, if we got real about Advent, that is the kind of excitement I think we would feel, not about the birth of Jesus 2007 years ago, but about the continuing birth of God's love in our hearts today. We should be walking around snapping our fingers and humming *Something's Coming*. (*Kitchen, work, traffic, Albertsons*) Let's face it, people, we're not all that excited about the gift of faith we share. We're not all that taken with the reality of God with us, or the possibility of growing in the Spirit of love, the Spirit of hope Jesus brought to the world so long ago. We may even be numb to the privilege that is ours to make that love, that hope real in our world today. Last week we said, "*Wake Up!*" This week we say, "*Get real!*" The transformation of our hearts is not finished.

Folks, something's coming! But we may miss it. Over this past year, we have found countless ways to block the movement of God's love in our hearts. We hold on to hurts, we get jealous, we lie, cheat and hurt people; we're greedy and stingy; we fear others won't like us, so we give into peer pressure at work or at school to compromise our faith in Jesus. As the old line from the 60's goes, "*If we were on trial for being followers of Jesus, would there be enough evident to convict us?*"

John the Baptist takes this "get real" piece to the next level when he tells us to repent. He urges us to open our hearts, not to his baptism, but to the baptism of Jesus that we received when we were baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire; when we were baptized into the life of Jesus. Then he adds this curious, even mysterious part. "*His winnowing fan is in his hand. He will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.*" What's that all about? Is he referring to the contrast between the saved and the lost? The good and the

bad? The faithful and unfaithful? No! John is referring to all of us and what we all must go through. We are all both wheat and chaff.

The fire is part of the baptism in Jesus. We are baptized in the Spirit and fire. Fire is not the fate of the lost, but the refining of the blessed. We are all both wheat and chaff, good and bad, faithful and unfaithful. But the burdens we carry do not make us unfit for Advent's message. They qualify us as prime candidates. Using this metaphor of the wheat and chaff, we all must go through the winnowing process, for the fire of Christ's love will burn away the chaff we carry around with us day after day. In Dante's work *Purgatorio*, the only exit was through a wall of fire. Once the pain was burned away by love, the other side was Paradise, sheer joy.

Our problem, of course, is that we've already been baptized with Jesus' baptism. What can we do? While baptism cannot be repeated, it's good to remember that in the early church, reconciliation was seen as something like a new baptism. Because of the calendar before Christmas this year, our major parish celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation will be next Sunday evening at 7 pm. For those who don't like to drive at night, we will have a special celebration of Reconciliation the following Friday. Check your bulletin, please. Folks... (say)

*Something's coming, something good.
If we can wait!
Something's coming, and we know what it is,
And it is... Gonna be great!*

We must move from make believe to real faith. May our celebration of the Eucharist continue the transformation of our hearts.