Homily for December 8, 2002
Second Sunday of Advent Cycle B

By Father Charles Bowes

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11
2 Peter 3:8-14
Mark 1:1-8

Hope is so real we can taste it in Advent Season.

"Are we there yet?" That's the question the little ones ask as the car backs out of the driveway. "Is it Christmas yet?" ask the little ones from now until December 25. At the liturgy for the school children this past week, I explained how the candles up here at the side of the ambo are a kind of timekeeper – each one marking off a week of waiting, a week of expectation. And the waiting and the expecting and the hoping are not just for Jesus at Christmas, but for God to draw near every day and every moment of every day.

"Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths," cries John the Baptist in Mark, chapter one, quoting Isaiah, chapter forty, our first reading. Hope – waiting, expectation – we human beings can't live without it. Unlike brute animals, we are blessed – or cursed – to be able to think about the future. So essential is this to human life that human beings simply cannot live without hope, without something to live for, without something to look forward to. To be without hope, to have nothing to live for, is to surrender to death and despair

But we can find all sorts of things to live for, and we can hope for almost anything: for some measure of success or security, the realization of a modest ambition. We hope for our children, that they might be saved from our mistakes and sufferings and find a better life than we have known. We hope for a better world, throwing ourselves into politics or medicine or technology so that future generations might be better off. Not all these forms of hope are selfish; in fact, through the years, such aspirations have brought dignity and purpose to the lives of many.

But one of the reasons we read the Old Testament during Advent is to learn what to hope for. The people of the Old Testament had the courage to hope for big things: that the desert would be turned into fertile land; that their scattered and divided people would eventually be gathered again; that the blind would see, the deaf hear, the lame walk; that not only their own people, but all the peoples of the earth, would be united in the blessings of everlasting peace. "Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill shall be made low; the rugged land shall be made a plain, the rough country, a broad valley. Then the glory of the

Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

So it is that we, today, hope for the same things as the Old Testament people, for their hopes are not yet realized. But we differ from them in two ways. First, the coming of Jesus in history partly fulfills God's promises and immeasurably confirms and strengthens our hope. And second, we differ from the Old Testament people in that Jesus has revealed to us that God is not far off, but is already in our midst. Hence the central role of Mary and of John the Baptist during Advent, because they are portrayed as recognizing this presence of the living God in our midst, revealed in Jesus.

So you see, the kids are right! We are there yet – now – today and every day – the Lord is near and we but take a moment to be aware, to touch the present with all its fire and promise and pain. An aid to this awareness, I find, is the sacrament of reconciliation which we'll be celebrating communally a week from Monday, at 7:00 p.m. Our unloving choices and struggles are touchstones for our hope – for we know we blow it or we can't handle it – this enterprise of life. And we're not alone in that – we're all sinners, needy people whom God loves and wants always to tell us so. Jesus is God's good word to that effect: "I've come to call sinners, not the righteous," he said. We can celebrate together God's persistent closeness, God's obstinate refusal to stay unassociated with all that's human in its many hues and postures. We call that closeness Jesus, and the season of that closeness we call Christmas.

The poet and large animal veterinarian, Baxter Black, is fond of saying, "Every day is Saturday for a dog." And I guess every day is Christmas for a person of faith, since hope is so real, and we can taste it especially in Advent Season.

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