

December 17, 2006
Third Sunday of Advent (C)

By Father Charles Bowes

Zephaniah 3:14-18
Isaiah 12:2-3, 4, 5-6
Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 3:10-18

Congratulations, folks...we're all pregnant!

I recall as a student in the seminary here in Cincinnati having to spend most holidays away from my family home in Florida. I recall one Christmas feeling especially glum.

Fortunately, my program in pastoral ministry required that our class meet with a spiritual director. He was a jolly sort and greeted our class with a beaming smile, joyfully proclaiming, "Is this not a most blessed Advent?" To which I replied, "Not exactly." Sensing that not everyone was jolly, he inquired about any troubles and I mentioned being homesick.

Considering the dilemma, he offered a response I've remembered to this day. He said, "The way I learned about Advent was when my sisters were pregnant. That's when I began to understand that Advent was asking me to become pregnant too - pregnant with God - so that on Christmas I, too, would give birth to holiness. And it would all be a gift - not my achievement - like the new life within my sisters. I realized that during those four weeks I was to ask myself where I was so barren that not even God could grow there. Where were the empty, desolate places inside me that could not support life? And where was I so full, so busy, so crowded, so filled up with other things - work, play, TV, computer, CDs, sports, music - that there was no room for God to get in? Where was I so filled up with all the things that God had given me that they had forced God out, and now there was no room within?"

As a young fellow, I learned that lesson way back then. How was I to become a womb for God to grow in? And I needed God's help - both to name and to claim my empty places - because emptiness, need and powerlessness invite the invasion of God. That's the great lesson we have from Jesus on the cross - it is precisely where and when he is powerless, alone, naked that God draws near.

I think that's along the lines of what folks were asking John the Baptist in Luke chapter 2, our gospel. They sought happiness and peace amidst life's struggles. "Just tell us what we need to do, Big John," they said. And he did, saying, "be fair and just," "don't accuse falsely," do this, don't do that. But what John did not say, and what I think is the overwhelming gift of Jesus' infleshment, is how a simple "yes" by a young woman, or an equally simple "help me to see" by a blind man, or my own "show me the way" prayer born of emptiness - each of these is not our doing but invites God to do, to be, to invade our needy hearts. And for me, that makes for Christmas wherever I am, all year-round. It takes my emptiness, uses my need and makes me pregnant with God - ever a gift and never my achievement.

So, let us pray: Still my anxious mind, God my friend. May I sit with my longing for true peace, so as to find it in your Word and your promises through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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