



Bringing Home the Word

Fourth Sunday of Advent (A)
December 22, 2019

Focusing on God

By Fr. Mark Haydu, LC

A painting by Domenico Ghirlandaio, *The Nativity*, shows the figures set in a golden, eternal background. Details are missing: no landscape, cave, stable, or cattle. Ghirlandaio, Michelangelo's teacher, focuses on the people. The Gospel also refrains from external details and focuses only on the main actors: Mary and Joseph and what is going on in their hearts and minds.

Joseph has to decide how to handle surprising news: His wife is with child and he isn't the father. She claims it was by divine intervention. He had every intention of protecting her while at the same time respecting the law.

Sunday Readings

Isaiah 7:10–14

The Lord himself will give you a sign; the young woman, pregnant and about to bear a son, shall name him Emmanuel.

Romans 1:1–7

Through him we have received the grace of apostleship.

Matthew 1:18–24

"Do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her."

Luckily his open and honest heart hears indications from an angel. He is to do the unthinkable—take her to himself—because the unimaginable has happened: "It is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived" (Matthew 1:20).

The artist paints Joseph sleeping peacefully because he is the just man who silences his troubled heart in order to hear God's voice. He, like Mary, reflects on things profoundly and grapples with God's will and the amazing vocation placed before him. His struggle in prayer leads him to have faith and trust. Following God's plan will mean pilgrimage, thus the walking stick, water jug, and knapsack.

We are all tempted to flee from the challenges of discipleship. Yet today Joseph shows us how to "man up." He assumes his role as a servant leader, teacher, and example. His dozing is not one of laziness but of silent self-control that leads to attentiveness and obedience to God's voice. +

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A Word from Pope Francis

We need, then, to open our hearts to the true light, Jesus Christ. He is the light that can illumine life and turn our darkness into light; the light of goodness that conquers evil; the light of the love that overcomes hatred; the light of the life that triumphs over death.

—Address to Vatican Curia,
December 21, 2018



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Am I listening for Jesus' call in everyday life experiences?
- How do I face the challenges of following Jesus?

Home for the Holidays

By Alice Camille

I always get the creeps from Currier and Ives. It's not that I don't have my sentimental streak. I save old Christmas cards and the caps from champagne bottles. And my heart quivers at the sight of Rudolph being spurned by the other reindeer.

But I find myself in resistance mode about this time, when the Currier-and-Ives-style holiday seems jammed down my throat. Sleigh scenes and chubby Santas aside, not every Christmastime has been a memory of roaring fires, hot chocolate, and close-knit family. Some Christmases in my memory were three-alarm disasters that can awaken me in a cold sweat.

Paradoxically, part of the trouble with the holidays is that it's homecoming season. Traveling can be a bear, but it's not only slogging airports and highways in bad weather that bugs me. It's what I might have to navigate when I reach my destination that's the real worry.

My family is fairly well-behaved. We have no serial killers or deviants, and much of the time we can be counted on to be normal about festive gatherings and their religious and cultural significance.

But we do have prodigal members, those who have gone certifiably astray by the usual markers and whose presence or absence at every holiday is an issue. I



don't know which I mind more: the years when a disruptive arrival leads to shouting and tears, or the times when a quiet boycott makes us retell the old stories about what went wrong and why someone is unwelcome. I anticipate those conflicts with dread.

Universal Message

This story is common and probably why Jesus included a prodigal parable in his repertoire. A son turns out to be a disappointment to his father and a source of shame to his brother. The son who does everything wrong disappears for years. The son who plays it by the book remains at home, working in the family business. Then one day, guess who returns? And guess what the anxious parent and furious stay-at-home sibling do next?

The point of the parable—variously called the parable of the Prodigal Son or the story of the forgiving father—is aimed at neither the son who was lost, nor the father who finds it in his heart to embrace him again. It's the third party in this tale, the obedient brother, who receives the moral lesson. Jesus, remember, is addressing the Pharisees, who can be self-righteous about how obedient they are, like the older brother in the story. The parable affirms that sinners will sin and that God, who is

absolute mercy, will forgive. That much is unquestioned.

But how do average Christians react to this news? Does understanding God's mercy comfort or offend us?

God's Justice

Most of us are not villains, but law-abiding people with a few peccadilloes. Our wrongdoing is minor and run-of-the-mill—the kind of thing easily swept under the rug of our conscience. And because we toe the line, we greatly appreciate it if others do, too. If they don't, we would prefer that they pay the consequences. But what if God lets them off scot-free? Where's the justice in that?

Divine compassion often offends our sense of justice. After all, people shouldn't be able to do anything they want! That's certainly true—but God's mercy doesn't imply that they can. Sin is still a bad idea that leads to heartache. But God chooses to respond to the wayward child with open arms and not a door slammed in the face. If we're part of this family, we'd better make room for that notion. +



Lord, you are Emmanuel, "God with us." Open the eyes and ears of my heart that I may see your presence in every person I meet, and hear your voice in the cry of the poor.

—From *Joyful Meditations for Every Day of Advent and the 12 Days of Christmas*, Rev. Warren J. Savage and Mary Ann McSweeney

WEEKDAY READINGS

December 23–28

Monday, Advent Weekday:
Mal 3:1–4, 23–24 / Lk 1:57–66

Tuesday, Advent Weekday:
Sir 35:1–12 / Mk 10:28–31

Wednesday, Christmas: Is 52:7–10 /
Heb 1:1–6 / Jn 1:1–18 or Jn 1:1–5, 9–14

Thursday, St. Stephen:
Acts 6:8–10; 7:54–59 / Mt 10:17–22

Friday, St. John: 1 Jn 1:1–4 /
Jn 20:1a and 2–8

Saturday, The Holy Innocents:
1 Jn 1:5–2:2 / Mt 2:13–18