

[Readings: Micah 5:1-4a; Psalm 80; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45]

I have mentioned many times that the Church in her wisdom always has a deep theological reason and then a simple, practical reason for doing what she does and why things are. My first Advent here ten years ago, someone asked about the blue hangings in church. Why blue? I said, "Because it symbolizes the changing sky, the setting sun with its purple, rose and blue colors, signaling the darkness of winter and the arrival of the Light of the World on Christmas." They bought it! The practical reason for the blue? "We ran out of purple material!"

A hymn we sing during Advent is: "People look east. The time is near." As Christmas approaches, our Advent hymn tells us where to direct our attention: to the east. Why there?

The east is the sunrise place, the place where each new day begins when the sun comes up. It is the place where the Garden of Eden was: Adam and Eve lived in a garden east of Eden. It is the place where the Magi set out to see the Christ Child. It is the place where Christ's return in glory was expected.

In a sense, the Church is always standing on tiptoe and straining her eyes eastward as she longs for the final coming of Christ. When churches were built, for centuries the historical tradition was to place the altar facing east, so when the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is offered, the priest and the people are facing east. This church has the altar facing east, but since Vatican II, the presider now faces west! So you, the people still honor a centuries-old tradition.

The night watchmen on the walls of ancient Jerusalem looked eagerly to the east for the first glimmering of the dawn so that their shift would end and they could punch out and go home. When Christ returns at the end of time, His radiant light will once and for all dispel the darkness that still fills our hearts, our minds and our souls. "East," the place of reborn light and fresh beginnings, is where we shall glimpse God's salvation, just as Elizabeth glimpsed it when her cousin Mary visited her, as we heard in today's Gospel. "East" is where the prophet Micah looked, for that is where the people of Israel had been exiled.

Micah rejoiced to know that it was in their midst that God would be revealed as a shepherd leading God's people home and who would be their peace forever. That God is our shepherd and our peace today.

We sing that same hope in today's Responsorial Psalm refrain: "Lord, make us turn to You. Show us Your Face and we shall be saved." For us, looking eastward is looking God-ward, as we welcome God's light in Jesus Christ that scatters the darkness in our lives. We look God-ward for the vision and the strength to do the will of God, as Jesus did.

As our reading from the Letter to the Hebrews puts it: "Behold, I come to do your will, O God." Mary said it in our readings twelve days ago: "May it be done to me according to Your word." We join Mary and Elizabeth in looking eastward, looking God-ward if we are to serve God and each other faithfully and joyfully.

During these Advent days, we pray that when we leave here during these final few days of preparation for Christmas, we can be a light in the mounting darkness, evil and sin in the world, pointing others to the east by our acts of kindness and our words of peace. "People, look east. The time is near."

Come, Lord Jesus! AMEN!