

[Spirituality](#)



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As you recall from the beginning of Advent, we understand that this season is a time when we prepare for the coming of Jesus, in different ways — one is the coming of Jesus at the end of the world. That was emphasized earlier in the season, but also how Jesus comes to us in everyday life, through our sacraments, through our contacts with one another. But also we prepare during this time for the celebration of the birth of Jesus into our human history.

Fourth Sunday of Advent

[December 23, 2018](#)

Micah 5:1-4A

Psalms 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19

Hebrews 10:5-10

Luke 1:39-45

That's what's emphasized in today's readings if we listen carefully: to be ready, once more, for Jesus to be born and to become part of the history of our human family, to be with us as we live our everyday life, to continue to guide and show us the way. As we make this final preparation then for the celebration of the birth of Jesus, we should listen carefully to how Jesus wants us to respond. And I think the lessons today are very clear.

Jesus comes to show us a different way of how to live, to dramatically be converted, to turn around in our lives by following him. This is what Elizabeth praised Mary for: "Blessed are you," Elizabeth says to Mary, "because you listened and responded to God's word." When Mary had said, "Be it done to me according to your will," Mary had listened to that voice that spoke to her and said, "Yes, I will follow. I will obey God." And actually, obey means to listen deeply so that we hear God speaking to us, and Mary did.

That's also what we're reminded of when we listen to the first lesson. The prophet Micah proclaimed a new time for the chosen people, when a person would come (and he was looking forward to Jesus) who would fulfill God's promise, who would

actually bring change to the chosen people. He would be peace among them. Jesus, born in Bethlehem, as the prophet proclaims, is that one who brings peace. If we listen deeply, we know that we, too, then are called to bring peace.

But especially the Gospel lesson — first in that letter to the Hebrews, that's the very thing that Jesus proclaims, "I have come to do your will, o God. I have come to do your will." Jesus himself listens deeply and then follows God's way. Mary, who has listened deeply and follows God's way, we think of as the first disciple because Jesus himself later on in his life (it's recorded in Luke's Gospel also) tells about Mary and why Mary is really to be blessed. You may remember the incident. It's a time when a person in the crowd, a woman cries out to Jesus.

She's so impressed with his words and what he's doing. She cries out, "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you." She was praising the mother of Jesus. But Jesus says in reply, "Blessed are those who hear the word of God and do it." That doesn't exclude Mary, of course; she was the one who most of all listened to the word of God. But Jesus proclaims that is what makes Mary so special. She is one who has listened deeply to God's word and followed it.

And so as we prepare now in this final week of Advent — a short week, of course — but as we prepare, we must try harder to think about the ways in which we have to listen to Jesus. Of course, we've been coming to church year after year after year, Sunday after Sunday, and we've heard God's word time after time, but have we really listened, listened deeply, and followed that word? I can think of some easy examples, especially if you listen to the Beatitudes in Matthew's Gospel. Have we listened to those? "Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the reign of God."

This time of the year when we're remembering Jesus, celebrating his birth, it's so easy to be caught up in the spirit of materialism that's all around us. The advertising that comes at us all the time is always wanting us to get more, to get more. And it's not wrong to want to have material goods. God gave them to us as a gift. But that's the point — you need to remember that everything we have is a gift from God. That's why Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor," those who recognize that what they have is a gift from God and that God made the gift of this world not just for a few, but for all.

So, yes, we celebrate the gifts we have, but we have to keep trying to find ways to share so we don't have the terrible disparity between the rich and the poor that goes

on in our country and even more throughout the world. But also Jesus says in those Beatitudes, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice; they shall receive their fill." So we too have to listen. How can we make our world, make our own country, make our own city, our neighborhood a more just place?

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So often when people hear from the pulpit things that have to do with political life, say, the budget the Senate and Congress passes for our country, do we really pay attention to who benefits from our tax code where the rich get far more than the poor? We have to think about how we might change in our own attitudes in working for justice. That prophet Micah whom we listened to in the first lesson today, one of his most famous phrases is this, he says, "Listen, friends, to what God says. Here's all you have to do: Act justly, love tenderly and follow humbly the Lord your God," but act justly to start with. Justice isn't just something political through our tax policies or whatever else. No, it's a matter of right and wrong; we have to act justly. So we must listen to this word of God.

But also Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers." This, I think, we've listened to hardly at all, in the most profound sense. A scripture scholar, John McKenzie, tells us, "If Jesus did not reject violence for any reason whatsoever, we know nothing about Jesus." In other words, he's saying it's so clear in the Scriptures, in the Gospels that Jesus rejected violence. If you can't say that about Jesus after you listen and read these words of God, then you may as well say you don't know anything about Jesus — because that comes through so clearly.

Yet we find ourselves living in a situation in our world where violence is rampant. We experience it ourselves; we've suffered from it. But we have to find a way to reject violence, to follow the way of Jesus which is called active love, to return love for hate, good for evil, never accepting violence as a proper response to any situation. That's the word of Jesus. Are we willing to listen?

So as we complete our final preparation for the celebration of Christmas, I hope we might commit ourselves to, during this new year, listen more deeply each week to God's word. Let it enter deeply into our heart, into our spirit, into our mind, and let it really shape and guide the way we act; listen deeply. Elizabeth said to Mary, "Blessed are you because you have listened to God's word and followed it." We hope

that that's what God will say to us: Blessed are we because we, too, as Jesus, renewed the celebration of his coming once more into our world because we commit ourselves to listen deeply to him and to follow him, to bring his reign of peace and justice into its fullness in our world.

Editor's note: *This homily was given Dec. 23 at St. Ambrose Parish in Grosse Pointe Park, Michigan. The transcripts of Bishop Thomas Gumbleton's homilies are [posted weekly](#) to NCRonline.org. [Sign up here](#) to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.*