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Fourth Sunday of Advent

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

As Sr. Marie mentioned at the beginning, we will be celebrating the sacrament of reconciliation at the end of this liturgy of the word, and I think if we listen very carefully and deeply to the message that we've heard from these three readings, it will help to prepare us very well for this sacrament.

There was a book written some time ago about Mother Teresa. You may remember the name of it: *Something Beautiful for God*. The author was describing what Mother Teresa had done in her life, and as we know that story, we understand, I think, that really this was something beautiful for God and it kind of challenges all of us to think about what we should be doing, in a sense, for God.

But if we listen to the scriptures today, we'll discover, I think, that there's a different way to relate to God rather than to think about "what I'm going to do for God" and "what kind of penance I can do, what kind of good works I can do for God." Even bringing the gifts to the altar today, we do this, in a sense, doing something for God, but it's even more important (and the lessons today remind us of this) to keep on reflecting on what God does for us -- even before we ever could do anything for God, what God does for us.

Each of the lessons today reminds us of how God enters into our lives and acts for us. It's very clear in that first lesson. Right away, David is talking about what he's doing to do for God. He wants to build this temple to give God glory through a building, but God, through the prophet Nathan, tells David something quite different.

"Now you will tell my servant David, 'This is what the God of hosts says?'" and then he goes on to

describe how God had done things for David.

"I took you from the pasture, from tending the sheep, to make you commander of my people. I've been with you wherever you went and now I will make your name great as a name of the great ones on earth. I will provide a place for my people Israel, plant them that they may live there in peace."

And then God goes on to tell David that "I will build you a house."

David doesn't have to build a temple or any kind of place for God; God has always been with David and the chosen people. God has been doing things for them all the time.

Finally God says, "Your house and your reign shall last forever before me. Your throne shall be forever firm."

See, when God says he's building a house, what he means is he's establishing David as a dynasty that will go on forever, and there's no hint of it here, but we know from the gospel that Jesus now becomes the one who builds that house of God that goes on forever, which is the people, the church, the house of God.

So God is reminding us of what God does for us, and in the second lesson today, Paul reminds us "God is able to give you strength and peace because of the good news I proclaim." God brings a message to us that gives us peace, strength, joy.

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In the gospel lesson, of course, even more, we begin to understand what God does for us. In the example of Mary, the angel came and greets her, "Rejoice, full of grace, God's favor is with you. God is with you." Now we who, I think, often kind of carry a burden of guilt can understand why Mary would be troubled. God is saying to her "God is with you, you're full of grace, you're full of favor before God." How many of us really are confident of that?

But Mary becomes troubled as we would, but the angel reassures her: "Yes, you are the favored one. You have been blessed. God has brought you forth and God has given you grace, fullness of life, blessing forever." It's the same thing that God will say to us. But God goes on to say to Mary what more God is going to do. God is going to send the holy spirit upon her and the power of the Most High will overshadow her, and therefore the holy child to be born shall be called Son of God.

An amazing revelation, an amazing proclamation from that angel to Mary, this simple, ordinary young woman, a peasant, fully favored with God's grace. Now God is going to do something for her and for us that is beyond our imagination, really, that God will enter into human history, become part of the human race, the very Son of God will be born of Mary. It's all God's doing; it's what God is doing for us.

Of course, Mary's response is what is very important also. It's a response we must make now as God comes into our midst, into our hearts: "Let it be done to me according to your word. Let whatever God wants be done to me as God fills me with God's favor, God's grace, God's blessings, God's peace. Let it be done to me according to your word."

Especially since the Vatican Council, we've come to understand the role of Mary in our theology, as the theologians would say, a "type" of the church. Mary is the first and the most faithful of all the disciples of Jesus. She is the model for every disciple. So this morning, we use her as our model as we prepare for the sacrament of reconciliation. We try to remember how God comes into our lives.

There's one passage in the book of the prophet Ezekiel that I think is especially important to remind ourselves of as we try to be like Mary, open to the coming of God, because it's God's work to fill us with grace, to reconcile us with God. Here's what God says through the prophet Ezekiel:

"I will gather you from all the nations, bring you back to your own land and I shall pour clean water over you. You shall be made clean, cleansed from the defilement of all sin. I shall give you a new heart, remove your heart of stone, give you a human heart, a loving heart. I shall put my spirit within you and move you to follow my decrees and keep my laws. You shall be my people. I will be your God."

If we can open ourselves now as we begin to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation, open our hearts, open our spirits, be ready to say to God what Mary said, "Be it done to me according to your will." God's will is that we be filled with God's spirit, that we become the very presence of Jesus in the world. This is what Mary did.

She brought Jesus into our world and now Mary is our model, the first disciple, the model disciple, the faithful disciple. We must be like her, let the spirit of God come upon us, let God reconcile us, let God open us to God's love so that we will bring Jesus into this world wherever we go, in all of our relationships, in our work, in our participation in our civic and national life, so that we will bring the message of Jesus, the goodness of Jesus, the compassion of Jesus, into our own hearts, but especially into our world.

"Let it be done to me according to your word." Each of us, I hope, will let those words resound in our hearts as God comes to us now in the sacrament of reconciliation.

[Bishop Gumbleton preached this homily at St. Hilary Parish, Detroit, Mich.]

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