

The Inclusive Community

November 29, 2009

Homily of Dr. George H. McDonald

Psalm 88 Isaiah 9:2-7 Lamentations 3:25-33 Luke 21:28,31,34-36

The Sound of Silence

"The Lord is good to those who wait for God, to those who wait in darkness, who sit in silence, whose lives are empty."

This is the first day of Advent, a time to prepare for the coming again of the spirit of the Christ into our lives. Unfortunately, we live in a society which has helped us forget how to observe Advent. The result is that we have essentially forgotten what Christmas is all about. We have forgotten whose birthday we celebrate and why.

Long ago, Christians knew how to observe Advent, in the silence of prayer, in the darkness of repentance, in fasting and emptiness. But again this year, instead of sitting in silence, our ears will be assaulted by carols from hundreds of loud speakers. Instead of walking in the darkness, we will be surrounded by trees adorned with thousands of gaudy lights. We will feel driven to fill our emptiness with things and with food. Instead of preparing ourselves for the coming again of the spirit of the Christ-child into our lives, most Americans will merely prepare for Christmas. We will play our carols and light our trees and exchange our presents. Chances are when December 25th is over, many Americans will wonder why they still feel so empty, why Jesus was not born anew in them. The result is that America's suicide rate is highest in the week after Christmas.

My preaching will not do away with the carols and the glitter and the presents and the food. Nor do I want to do away with them. I enjoy them too much myself. But when I share my understanding of Advent as a season to prepare ourselves, I often feel as though I am a voice crying in the wilderness. Yet I know that I am not alone.

Paul Simon wrote these words in 1964:

**And the people bowed and prayed, To the neon god they made.
And the sign flashed out its warning, In the words it was forming
And the sign said, "The words of the prophets are written
On the subway walls, and tenement halls,
And whispered, in the sounds of silence."**

Jesus came, Jesus will come again, not with glaring lights, but in the darkness. The still small voice, the Word of God, will be given flesh, in the sound of silence. The Christ will come, as he first came, not to those in royal palaces, but to those with empty hands and empty hearts.

But let's go one step deeper, because I believe that the way our society prepares for Christmas is but a symptom of our lives in general.

We are terrified of darkness. I am not speaking just of children who want a night light burning when they go to bed. My father had detached retinas in both eyes. The doctor was able to re-attach one of them. For the last eleven years of his life, my father lived in fear that he would lose what little sight he had in his "good eye."

Before the time of electric lights, people understood darkness. Where could we go in New Jersey to gaze up into a starry night sky, without having the lights from a city or passing cars distract us? We try to push back the darkness. Simon wrote:

**In restless dreams I walked alone, Narrow streets of cobble stone
Beneath the halo of a street lamp, I turned my collar to the cold and damp
When my eyes were stabbed by the flash,
Of a neon light, that split the night
And touched the sound of silence.**

Again, most people don't know what to do with silence. We don't like it. Many of us can't stand it. Think of the cars with booming speakers disturbing everyone within a 2 block radius, or those who can't leave home without their Walk-man or their "ghetto blaster." I had a friend whose TV stayed on 24/7. He couldn't stand the silence of being alone. Simon described an even more subtle form of silence.

**And in the naked light I saw, Ten thousand people, maybe more
People talking without speaking, People hearing without listening
People writing songs, that voices never share, and no one dare,
Disturb the sound of silence.**

Or again, we certainly don't like emptiness. In our materialistic age, we try to fill our lives with things, and things, and still more things. But those things never seem to fill us. So we seek relationships which we hope will make us feel good. That doesn't work either! So we try pleasure, but we're never filled. It's never enough! When all else fails, increasing numbers of Americans resort to drugs, to run away from their emptiness, to numb themselves to the point that they're not even aware of the emptiness of their lives.

Somehow, it never seems to occur to us, often, even to the best of us, that nothing in the world, no-thing, no-person, will ever be able to fill our emptiness. St. Augustine prayed, "Our hearts are restless, O God, until they rest in you." Another way of saying that is: We

each have a God shaped hole in us, and only God can fill that emptiness. Simon knew this too. Listen, as he speaks on behalf of God:

Fools, I said, you do not know, Silence like a cancer grows
Hear my words that I might teach you, Take my arms that I might reach you
But my words like silent raindrops fell, And echoed in the wells
Of silence.

We detest the darkness, because the darkness reveals the darkness in our own spirits. Carl Jung called it the dark side of our personalities. We can't stand the silence, because in our silence, God's still small voice might make some new demand on us.

We find the emptiness excruciating, because it reveals how hollow and meaningless our lives often are. The darkness, the silence, the emptiness, are terrifyingly painful. That's why we try so hard to avoid them. However, the pain is neither physical nor psychological. The pain is deep in our spirit. Therefore, the issue in our lives, in our preparation for December 25th -- actually, for every day -- is a spiritual one.

Several years ago, I heard a Gerald May, a Christian psychiatrist observe that in our times, we do the same thing with our spirituality that our grandparents did with their sexuality. We deny it; we repress it; or we transfer it. "It's too personal," we say. "Nice people don't talk about things like that."

Self-illuminated by deceit, illusion, prejudice, half-truths, and outright lies, we deny that we are in spiritual darkness. Unwilling to admit the thundering silence within us, refusing to hear the voice of God, we repress the silence with endless babble and background noise. Unable to bear the gaping emptiness within us, we transfer it by trying to fill the void with anything and everything, everything except the One who alone can fill us.

Paul Simon saw and heard and felt what we refuse to acknowledge, that the darkness is our friend; the silence is our companion; the emptiness is our longing for God. He understood. He began his song with these words:

Hello, darkness, my old friend, I've come to talk with you again.
Because a vision softly creeping, Left its seeds while I was sleeping
And the vision that was planted in my brain, still remains
Within the sound of silence.

This Advent may we prepare ourselves: embrace the darkness, enfold the silence in our arms, fill ourselves with emptiness.

For we wait,
to give flesh and blood to the Christ in our own bodies,
to incarnate the eternal word of God in our own lives,
to be a vital part of the body of the One, whose birth we celebrate on Christmas Day.

And here is the promise:

In the darkness of a midnight clear,

in the silent and holy night,

the Word of God still comes to all

whose empty hearts yearn for the Divine Mystery alone -- Immanuel, God-with-us.

Amen.