

“Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low.”

SURPRISED BY JOY

I was surprised by the theme of our readings from Holy Scripture this Second Sunday of Advent. Advent in our Catholic tradition is a season of preparation for the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus among us. We manifest this preparation as a penitential period signaled by the color purple within the Church worldwide. It is a season of being called to look within ourselves, to find where we need to change in order to better live the reality that our God is coming to us as a fragile human being, an infant. And that this is God who saves us, who is the way, the Truth, and the Life that we must follow. So yes we have to prepared ourselves for this in order to receive the gift that God plans to give each one of us. But this preparation is not a grim one, it is one of hope; and hope is the precursor to joy. The Scripture readings are thus designed to aid in our preparation each of the 4 Sundays. The joy of the season is brought out on the Third Sunday, Gaudete Sunday, or the Sunday of joy. So that’s why I was surprised to see that in the readings for today, the Second Sunday, snippets of joy peaking out just when we need them. If we listen to the news, the world seems so dark and hopeless that we might despair; is this ever going to stop? Then Baruch tells us, “Take off your robe of mourning and misery; put on the splendor of glory from God forever.” From Ps126, “Although they go forth weeping, carrying the seed to be sown, they shall come back rejoicing, carrying the sheaves.” And Paul: “I pray always with joy in my every prayer for all of you.”

Now there is an image of preparation presented in today’s readings that is related to true joy. It is that of mountains (seen as barriers) being leveled and valleys (seen as pitfalls or traps) being filled in. From Baruch: “God has commanded that every lofty mountain be made low, and that the age-old depths and gorges be filled to level ground.” Thus the image is that once we have established peace with God, once we have conformed ourselves to God, we will see a flat landscape with no barriers or pitfalls, kind of like the Great Salt Lake desert flats. Living in NM or CO this image is on the surface not very appealing. We are inspired by lofty mountains and marvel at deep gorges and river valleys. Being out in this textured land can make our hearts grateful and joyful. Let me share with you one experience I had of this:

In the 80's our family would spend a week or two in Summit County, Colorado for vacation. Those of you who have been there in Frisco, or Breckenridge, or Silverthorne know of the beauty of the place. It is spectacular. Frisco is at the base of the 10 mile mountain range which leads up to Breck. The first peak is called peak one or maybe ten mile peak. Anyway the kids and I liked to climb that mountain once a season and most times we would reach the summit which gave truly spectacular views of the lake, and mountains and valleys. It was a steep ascent and in order to reach the summit in a timely manner you have to walk/crawl along a knife ridge some 500 meters long. The drop off on one side is some 3000 ft down to 10 mile creek and I70. The other side was better only 500 ft of rocks and boulders at a very steep pitch. The crossing always gives one pause but the summit was worth the effort. One year 2 of the boys and I and 2 teenage girls from a family from Iowa we had previously gotten to know well went up the mountain in the morning. Just below the base of the knife ridge we encountered a group of kids, mostly teenagers, who were resting there ready to go back down. They didn't want to go further. They were what we would now call disadvantaged kids supervised by some kind of councilor. We chatted a bit with some of the kids and then got ready to continue up. Then one boy who was a bit scruffy, with long hair and fatigues and about 15 or 16 years old said he would like to go with us. He had never been to the top of a mountain like this one. The councilor said OK he could go and I was responsible for getting him back to Frisco. It took a bit of coaxing and reassuring to get him through the ridge as he was having a lot of second thoughts. But he made it and quickly attained the summit. When he got there amid our unimpressed group, he just went ecstatic. I never forget the look of pure joy on his face. He made it! His tears were a reward for all of us. That is still my image of joy.

Yet spectacular and satisfying as this joy of mountain conquest is, even this joy is fleeting and doesn't last for long. C. S. Lewis in his journey from being a convinced atheist to a believing Christian noted that when one has the experience of joy one will desire to have that experience again and again. This experience of joy is not in the desiring of some thing but in the desiring the experience of a person, a person outside of me. So for our joy to be grounded, to be permanent, it must reside in the desiring of the person we call God. In other words the ultimate joy is what we call heaven. That's the level ground of the readings.

So how do we get there? How do we overcome and let go of our personal mountains and valleys and get grounded at the level of God? It's a matter of choice; of how we choose to reference our lives. I can choose the pursuit of happiness based upon my wants. I can counterfeit joy by doing things that make me happy. Or I can transcend fleeting happiness by placing my trust in God. We have to decide that joy for us does not depend upon the ups and downs of the circumstances of our lives. We must finally decide once and for all that the world cannot give us the joy that we seek. The desire to experience true joy is based upon the spiritual knowledge that while the world in which we live is shrouded in darkness, God has overcome the world. Jesus tells us as much: "In the world you will have troubles, but take courage, I have conquered the world."

Joy is the fruit of hope. "when I trust deeply that today God is truly with me and holds me safe in a divine embrace, guiding every one of my steps, I can let go of my anxious need to know how tomorrow will look, or what will happen next month or next year. I can be fully where I am and pay attention to the many signs of God's love within and around me." [Nouwen]

Thus hope raises us up out of the cares and concerns of our lives in the world. When hope is based solely on God, we are raised up to recognize him even in a tiny infant born in a manger. The mountains of our lives cease being barriers and the gorges are no longer pitfalls that we cannot lift ourselves out of. We can choose to be in such a state of profound, stable joy if we choose for God and not for our own doubtful self. When we choose to listen to God's voice over the voice of contemporary society we hear: "I love you, I am with you, I want to see you come closer to me and experience the joy and peace of my presence. I want to give you a new heart and a new spirit. All that is mine is yours. Just trust me and let me be your God." [Nouwen]

Yes this is the voice to listen to whether God is manifested as an infant or in His majesty. But that listening requires a real choice every moment of each day and night. It is you who decides.