

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

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Every congregation in major transition from one thing to another, such as All Saints Parish preparing to search for a new Rector, is essentially in a new season of “Come to Jesus.” Usually that phrase is uttered as a moment of imposed anger and judgement upon someone – “We’re going to have a Come to Jesus meeting!!”. However, in our context and situation it is exactly the best place you could be, and the benefits of Coming to Jesus are out of this world.

What I mean is to make our first focus coming to Jesus intentionally, or the buzz word these days, “mindfully”, to relearn what it means to hear his voice, and do what he says, and go where he leads.

Being distracted from the task of following Jesus is always the biggest problem to be faced in transition, whether calling it our discipleship, or as we use the word “discernment” to mean hearing and understanding God's will for our parish, and for each of us as we live our daily lives. The Collect for today makes it clear that one of the roadblocks to fully living the Christian life -- which means being in full Communion with Christ, to be in full relationship with Him -- is not listening to those who are crying out God's words, and therefore not acting on what they say prophetically.

Let us pray: Give us grace Lord to heed your warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our redeemer. Amen.

I have a picture that is captioned, “The Interim Pastor.” It is a picture of a priest leaning over, more like holding onto, an altar in a sanctuary, giving the clear impression of being at prayer; Prayer for the parish, prayer for his work ahead. It is a moment of the kind of prayer called intercession, as well as petition, a moment captured in art of one who is stepping in between and bringing the congregation to God for his grace and help. It is also a moment of listening: Lord, what needs to be done, and how shall we do it?

But here is one of the issues that I raised in my introductory comments – this work of the Interim as in this picture is to be the work of the entire congregation. Perhaps someone some day will stage a photo of a whole congregation kneeling at the parish altar, with those closest to the altar leaning on it, or touching it, and everyone behind them laying hands on those in front of them. What a powerful, powerful image of an interim congregation, a congregation in transition, doing the work that comes first and foremost, prayer. Listening and talking with God.

To me right up front, it means that everyone in the parish has a calling, and a duty to that calling, to be in prayer, in intercession and petition and listening discernment. It's not just the priest's duty, it's not just the vestry's, or the search team's duty, or of some sort of combination of the same. No, It is all of our work.

I have learned, though, and I can only hope the entire Body of Christ universal has learned this too, that jumping into the role of discerning God's will unprepared, or unpracticed or rusty, is dangerous and potentially faulty, that is, if the people involved have not kept up the practice of listening and talking to God. I'll tell you this: you can bet that the coaches of the 80 college football teams who are invited to play in the holiday bowl games are not going to tell their

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players, “Hey, guys, since you all are done with your regular season, you don't need to do any special work for that bowl game we're going to. So take a few weeks off, and just be in Pasadena an hour or so before the game! We'll be fine!”

They might get a week off to finish their semester final exams, but they will all spend at least a week, and maybe two, practicing hard for a good showing in the game. They're all on TV now.

We cannot think any different when it comes to parish discernment, and our lessons today make it clear it is an ongoing work to pray, and to keep learning about God who speaks.

There are a couple of immediate issues here.

One of them is the matter of how we consider prayer at all. The other is the matter of Listening to God and how THAT can happen at all.

So regarding the first matter, yes, Prayer is a Duty of Every Christian. The Prayer Book catechisms – all of them ever written - includes the question, “What is the duty of all Christians?” You know in this day and age of respect for those serving in the Armed Forces, duty is an acceptably positive concept: its a word of pride, of sacrifice, a word of respect, of understanding. We should also understand the same for Christians as disciples of Christ and toward God's Kingdom. And so the Prayer Book answers the question, “ The duty of all Christians is to follow Christ; to come together week by week for corporate worship; and to work, pray, and give for the spread of the kingdom of God.”

You see, Prayer, and all the other parts of Christian duty, is not simply a tool for you living longer as the studies have shown, nor as a centering practice to lower your blood pressure and make you feel peaceful, or simply something you do when you go to church on Sunday, or at those moments of personal crisis when you figure it couldn't hurt to pray.

No, the first awareness is that Prayer is actually a daily Duty as a follower of Christ, that prayer is actually effective – it really works and God has given it to you for that purpose, and it is our primary tool for hearing God, speaking to God, and thus being in relationship with him, being in Communion with him.

I coined a phrase about 4 years ago talking about this very thing: you know what -- or really, who -- the phrase “couch potato” is referring.

Well, In God's Army, there can be no such thing as a PEW Potato. Prayer is a work and a duty. You are neglecting your responsibility if you simply come to church for whatever reason – entertained by great music, illustrious sermons, hanging out with beautiful people – and you are a lazy Christian the rest of the week.

Prayer and Discernment are a work we are all called into. If you are rusty at it, then now is the time to peel it back a bit. But it will take some work, and it will take God helping us. And that is a large part of why I'm inviting you to 30 Days of Prayer.

The Lutheran prayer master, Ole Hallesby, said, “It is necessary for the Spirit of God to burn into our hearts this mystery, that the most important work we have to do is that which must be done on our knees, alone with God, away from the bustle of the world and the plaudits of men.”

Let's talk about that issue about Listening to the voice of God. And that raises what is our core problem about Listening, as we ask “WHOSE Voice is it?” Here it is before us unavoidably in the lessons for the Second Sunday of Advent. Listening, speaking, hearing, and not hearing..

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As I read through the Isaiah lesson a repeating cry came forward. We hear, "A voice cries out.." And then "A voice says, "Cry out!" It wasn't immediately clear, but I was fairly confident this was the voice of God." As soon, though, as I said, "Whose Voice?" I began to think of moments in the bible where there is simply a voice and no form, that is, nobody to be seen. Moses heard a voice at the burning bush, but there was no form. Elijah heard a voice and promptly pulled his cloak (his ancient hood) over his face. In another place Isaiah the prophet speaks God's words, "Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it."

But you will object that there are many voices out there. How do we know which is right, despite the testimony from scripture itself? Before talking about that, let's not lose track of the first issue. There is a call to duty. That duty is to listen and to speak. That duty is the same whether for us, or John the baptizer, or for the apostles. Because we are confused now does not mean we should stop learning to listen and discern. So we move forward with that intention agreed upon, and it is agreed we want to listen and we will learn.

Of course, if we had been standing with Moses at the bush, or with Elijah, or John the baptizer and others at the Baptism of Jesus, or with the three apostles at the Transfiguration; or had been able to just listen to Jesus teach and preach and proclaim, then we would know his voice, wouldn't we.

I think God still speaks to people in such ways today. But in case you at this point think this something of an impossibility, I would say as you practice the discipline and art of listening for God's voice, and of course, pay attention when he DOES speak, you will be amazed and delighted. And the place we start in learning what God sounds like when He speaks and what it is He is concerned to say is from God's word already spoken. Certainly we can say this, that one of the great purposes of the Bible is to get to know the voice of God in content if not sound. And then learn to recognize that voice in our hearts and minds, and yes, in our ear.

Peter speaks to this very thing. The same Peter, who heard the voice from the cloud, God's voice, twice, and spent three years with Jesus listening to his voice. So this Peter says in the epistle today, "While we are waiting for his coming back, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish, have the patience of secured salvation", and then he says, to the point, in chapter 3 vs 18, "grow in the grace and KNOWLEDGE of our Lord Jesus Christ." Read your scriptures, hear the word written of Jesus, and be in prayer to hear his speaking to you.

This is the response of all those in the bible, and throughout our Christian history. And it is the response for each of you as well

So that must be the response of this specific parish, for this particular time of transition, as well. There are new things ahead of you: a new rector, new ministries, new people, etc. But what will they look like? And will we do the right thing? And with such unanswered questions comes anxiety, speculation, and unfortunately often tension among yourselves and even distancing.

Your response must first and foremost be: I want to spend time with Jesus, to sit at his feet, to ask the tough questions, to accept Him as my authority, to hear his Word to me and to us. And that means, conversation. conversation not first with each other; conversation with God first.

To that end, as your Interim Rector, I am pressing you for an immediate and extended time of prayer and fasting as a parish. Advent is upon us, and the season, like Lent, is a time of

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preparation for the coming of the Lord. What better time to watch and listen and learn to listen again. And so the 30 Days of Prayer. Check your email, and for those who don't have email that we know of, mail outs have begun. In my mind this call to conversation with God, which is what prayer is -- listening to God and talking to God -- includes 3 things to assist its success -- weekly meetings with each other, and your daily private devotions, and some sense of personal fasting. No different than the usual for Advent anyway.

If prayer has not been a part of your regular life, then we will learn. At the foundation of your confidence is this.....that because you are a believer, because you have been baptized, because you have received the power of the Holy Spirit in confirmation, you are alive in Christ. And thus you, too, will be able to listen to the Voice of God in prayer.

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