

Homily for the 4th Sunday of Advent

December 19-20, 2020

Readings: 2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16; Romans 16: 25-27; Luke 1:26-38

Preacher: Phyllis Tierney, SSJ

“Keep trudging!” was a favorite message of my good friend and pastor, Fr. Frank Connolly during my first years as a pastoral assistant at St. Pius Tenth in Greensboro, NC. It was God’s message to the Israelites as they trudged through the desert for forty years on their way to the Promised Land, and it is still the same message God is giving us today.

The nine months of the pandemic have seemed like an endless journey and the message is always the same: Wear your mask! Wash your hands! Keep your distance! We see glimmers of hope in a new vaccine and the hurdles that accompany it, but we are still called to live in the now!

The readings today hold a promise. It is the Fourth Sunday of Advent and the celebration of Christ’s birth is drawing near. First we hear the prophet Nathan speaking to King David in the Second Book of Samuel. Nathan is sent to tell King David that God is pleased with him and promises to establish David’s lineage as his chosen people. David misunderstands the message and promises God to build a magnificent temple for God so he will no longer have to dwell in a tent. God sends Nathan back to chide David, reminding him that He has always dwelt among the people and cannot be contained in a single temple, no matter how lavish! This is the paradox: God chose to dwell among the Israelites, leading them through every peril. God promised to continue to be present and when the time comes will send a new heir from David’s house. God doesn’t promise instant fixing. “Keep trudging!”

In today’s Gospel from Luke, the Angel Gabriel appears to Mary, a humble Jewish maiden and invites her to be the mother of God. “You will conceive and bear a son and give him the name of Jesus. Great will be his dignity and he will be called Son of the Most High...”

As I reflect on the circumstances and the message, I am invited to ponder on Mary’s full acceptance of that invitation, totally unknowing of what the future may hold and trusting fully in the promise of the Messenger. Mary says Yes, “Let it be done to me as you say!” I doubt very much that she thought that future generations would call her “blessed.” In her full acceptance of the invitation, she followed Fr. Frank’s pithy saying, “Keep trudging!” Because we have already read ahead, we know the other parts of the story! Mary didn’t go into hiding. She trusted Gabriel’s message and took the long journey to visit her cousin Elizabeth who was also with child.

Perhaps we could take some time in these next days to reflect not only on the negative consequences of the pandemic—the vast loss of life, employment, housing, and the hunger of many—but also on the heroism of front line workers, and the kindnesses of friends and neighbors who have reached out to us.

We, too, are called to say “yes” to the God dwelling in and among us. The Light will come only if we are willing to each carry a small candle ourselves. Each of us has the power to reach out, by a prayer, a thank-you, a phone call. Perhaps it will be the courage to heal a broken relationship, a pledge to listen to the person whose political views are so different from my own, the resolve to keep my mask on, wash my hands, and maintain social distance.

Transforming this broken world of ours is a long journey. It requires us to carry our own candle bravely and reach out to light the candle of another. We long for the day when we will become the community of Light, united with each other. Can we say “Yes,” not just once, but every day? We ask for the grace to “keep trudging!”