

Fr. John Sassani
Homily Given December 23, 2007
Fourth Sunday of Advent - Liturgical Year A

Independence and self-reliance are attributes that many of us prize – though life has a way of changing them – but I would guess that most of us want to live this way.

I certainly do. For me, independence and self-reliance manifest in many ways – some foolish. There was a period of four or five years where I didn't see a doctor. I didn't like my doctor, and I was in good health. "I'll be fine," I thought, while I weathered colds and flus on my own. Toward the end of my time in Sherborn, I became very sick with pneumonia. I finally called a parishioner who was a doctor to ask if she could squeeze me in. "No," she said, "I'm just about to leave. But I'll stop at the rectory on my way home." She prescribed me medicine and quality rest. She was very gracious to me – not just kind and generous. Her visit was a grace and an establishment of a relationship for my wellbeing.

In Sacred Scripture today, God's middle name is Grace. God gives himself to us in love for our wellbeing. Christ enters the world by a singular grace – by the virginal conception. Joseph couldn't grasp this at first. He couldn't imagine Mary's story to be true – but Joseph loved God, and he loved Mary, and he didn't want any harm to come to her, so he was going to handle things quietly. In a dream, God gave Joseph a message full of grace: Have no fear. Take Mary as your wife. The child is the gift of the Holy Spirit. Call him Jesus and know that he is the promised Emmanuel.

What is the meaning of all of this for us? Jesus, Emmanuel, came and is coming to help us, with our desire for independence and self-reliance, for these traits often keep us from hitting the mark in life – like me being my own physician, like Joseph having his envisioned plan, like Adam and Eve want to be gods themselves.

How do independence and self-reliance work in you? However it may be for you, Christ is Emmanuel for that particular thing – he is called Jesus, to save you from that particular thing.

We don't talk too much about grace – but we all know the experience. The help that comes from nowhere at just the right moment. An insight or inspiration that moves us in the right direction. A helpful word or generous help for us from another that enables us to do something we couldn't do alone. Grace – God giving himself to us in love for our wellbeing.

When we gather to celebrate Christmas, we'll be celebrating the birth of the fullness of Grace – God giving himself to us in Jesus his Son, to establish a relationship with us for our wellbeing, as a gift. But each Sunday, in the Eucharist, Jesus gives himself to us in what looks like bread and wine – to save us from our self-reliance and to invite our dependence on him instead. The fullness of grace entered the world – but is still here – Emmanuel by a singular grace. As we await his birth and his coming in glory, let us rejoice that he is Emmanuel now in the Eucharist – to help us depend and rely on him.

What a gift.