December 5, 2021    Second Sunday of Advent

Bishop Bradley’s Reflections on the Sunday Readings

This Advent Season is the second shortest Liturgical Season of the entire Church Year, but it’s one of the most beautiful and hope-filled of all the Seasons as well. During this Season, the Church keeps drawing our attention away from what is, here and now, to ponder and find hope in what is still to come. That’s really what all of Sacred Scripture does; it keeps reminding us that we are “pilgrims” on a “journey of faith” who are passing through this world, with Eternal Life with God in Heaven as the Goal --- our final destination.

Today, as we celebrate the Second Sunday of this brief liturgical season of “longing”, “preparing” and “waiting”, I keep being reminded of my own Episcopal motto, “waiting in joyful hope”---- for the celebration of the coming of Christ into the world on Christmas Day, and for the Final Coming of Christ at the end of all time. God’s holy Word today speaks messages of Hope to our hearts, and give us reasons to rejoice!

In today’s First Reading from the Prophet Baruch, we heard the Prophet tell the people: “let go of your robe of mourning and misery….and stand upon the heights…..and see that God is leading Israel in joy by the light of His glory.” The Psalm Response continued that message: “The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy!” In both those passages, we need to stop and realize how blessed we truly are that our God is “leading” us “by the light of His glory” throughout our life journey, day in and day out. And we also should pause---- perhaps you could pause right now as you hear this---to consider all the “great things” that the Lord has indeed done for us. Does that realization fill our hearts “with joy”?

In today’s Second Reading, from St. Paul’s beautiful letter to his beloved people of Philippi, we heard him say: “I pray always with joy in my every prayer for you----and am confident that the One who began the good work in you will continue it until the day of Christ Jesus.” God has begun “good works” within each of us, beginning on the day we were conceived in our mother’s womb, and He continues those “good works” within us as long as we keep ourselves open to God’s graces and His abiding Presence with us.
We are in the second week of this brand new Liturgical Year. This is the time not only to prepare our hearts well for the celebration of the coming of Christ into the world just two weeks from now on Christmas, but it is also the time for us to think about the ways that we need to renew and/or deepen our relationship with Christ and His Church. One of the most practical ways that we can “prepare” our hearts and “make ourselves ready” to receive Him when He comes is by making a good Confession. The Sacrament of Reconciliation is the best way for us to be cleansed of the sins in our lives that can burden us, and allow us to, in the words of that beautiful sentence in today’s First Reading: “let go of your robe of mourning and misery (and sinfulness)….and put on the cloak of God’s justice”.

These very brief four Sundays of Advent remind us who we are. We are reminded that our God has begun His “good work” within each of us. We are reminded that He continues to abide within us and comes to us in this celebration of the Eucharist in which we take part regularly. We are reminded that He comes to us in the loving, supportive presence of one another, brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ.

One of the classic Advent “figures” makes his appearance in today’s Gospel passage. St. Luke was very precise in trying to historically situate the coming of John the Baptist upon the scene in relation to those who were in power at the time: Tiberias Caesar, Herod, Pilate, Annas, Caiphas and all the others who, interestingly enough, would also be the ones who would play such a significant role in Jesus’ suffering and death just three years from this moment. John the Baptist’s message is one we know off by heart: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.” He goes on to tell us that we need to make the winding ways straight, and the rough ways smooth. That was a similar message in the second part of today’s First Reading as well from the Prophet Baruch. Our God wants to come to us----and He wants us to come to Him. The very important spiritual work that we need to do in Advent, and actually all year round, is to make sure that the “high places are made level, and the rough ways smooth, and the valleys are filled in”---in other words, that we get out of the way anything that might be in the way between ourselves and God. Level it; raise it; smooth it---whatever it takes.

Maybe there are things about our own life circumstances that need to be “straightened out”; maybe there are some parts of our relationships with others in our lives that need to be “smoothed” away. Advent is the time for us to do that.
at the beginning of this new Liturgical Year, so that we can keep moving forward on our life journey with Joy and Hope, even in the midst of the realities of our lives that can be sometimes confusing, troubling, painful and challenging.

The final part of today’s Second Reading makes a beautiful prayer for each of us to pray every day. St. Paul prayed that we could grow in knowledge for the very important purpose of learning what is of lasting value in our lives. There are so many “things” and “activities” that try to convince us that they are what matters more than anyone else, including God. However, our faith tells us that in the final analysis---in the “big picture”---only the things of God and only God’s ways ultimately matter. Let us make St. Paul’s prayer our own prayer as we continue our life journey: “This is my prayer---that your lives may increase ever more and more in knowledge and every kind of perception, to discern what is of value, so that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ...for the glory and praise of God.”

God bless you, now and always.