

The Fourth Sunday in Advent, Year C, December 22-23, 2018:
Readings: Micah 5:2-4; Psalm 80:1-7; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-49.

And now Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be ever pleasing to you, O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer – amen

If you're like most people, you look forward to the arrival of advent with a sort of nostalgic anticipation. Most of us carry a sense of romance about the season. We remember the simpler times of our childhood that are alive with the smells of fresh-baked Christmas cookies and the sounds of Nat King Cole crooning "Chestnuts roasting on a open fire." Or perhaps you look back fondly on sitting around the table with family you haven't seen in months as you enjoy a feast of feasts. Or perhaps it's sitting in the living-room with a cup of hot cocoa in front of a warm fire and lit tree as it snows outside. Of course there are a myriad of other memories and experiences that may mark our anticipation, but the point remains: most of us truly believe this is "the most wonderful time of the year." In fact, some of its wonderfulness is the promise and hope of a respite from the tragedies and monotony of the rest of the year that it seems to offer us.

If we are honest, however, the actual reality of the season falls far short of our romantic remembrances of it. Too often, the hustle and bustle with the ever increasing consumerism strangle out what joy and respite we hope for and, instead, they add stress and a reminder that life is not what we have hope for. For some of us, instead of hiding the hurt of past tragedies, the season pours salt on the wounds of broken families and prematurely lost loved ones. For an increasing number of us, it highlights our own depressions and anxieties; or it reminds us of the hurt of the deferred hope for a family. Fr. Ward shared with you last week that one of our dear young families tragically lost their baby – a loss that must sting all the more with Christmas right around the corner. My heart has been so heavy for them. Imagine, instead of planning for Christmas and the arrival of their new baby, they are planning a funeral.

I don't mean to make light of or exploit their pain and suffering; to the contrary, I mean to honor it and take it seriously. I want us to enter into it with them. The truth is, this life is not a scene from your favorite Christmas movie. Instead it can be as brutal and savage as a scene from a war movie: I'm thinking specifically of the opening scene of "Saving Private Ryan." In the opening minutes of this acclaimed film, the Allied forces are storming the beaches of Normandy and, for what seems to just drag on, all we see is the invading forces being mowed down by heavy machineguns perched on top of cliffs lining the beach. The plight of one poor soul has always stood out to me, however. The poor soldier has been hit with a heavy caliber bullet and had his arm severed off; in his dazed and confused state, instead of seeking shelter and a medic, he tries to locate his fallen arm. But having found it, and now deeply in the throws of shock, he sort of drifts and wonders about the shoreline uncertain of what to do. Mind you, this injury, severe though it be, is not a fatal one in and of itself, but because of the effects of shock he lingers too long and is eventually removed from the rest of the movie.

Saints, if we are not attentive to the realities of this life, we risk being like this poor soul wondering about the shoreline injured and in need of help but too lost to find it. As I have said before, we are at war, and we forget it to our own peril. We are caught up in a cosmic battle; as St. Paul explains, "we [battle] not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of the darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places."¹ In other words, we battle against Satan and his minions. Jesus understood this. That's why he says, "[the devil] was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies."²

¹ Ephesians 6:12

Jesus says its been this way since the beginning because it goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden. The Triune God placed his beloved children in a paradise that he created specifically for them to enjoy his real presence and love through his craftsmanship/artisanship even as they themselves were already a work of their Father's hand; so much so, in fact, that they shared in his image – they looked like him and could even act and create like him. Dreadfully, however, in his envy and hatred for God, Satan hated God's children and the paradise they inhabited. So he launched an offensive against it and them. We might say, in the parlance of today, that he spread "fake news." He launched a covert misinformation campaign against God's children; something like we might see in a spy/war movie. To do so, Satan didn't just make something up. He is far more crafty than that. Instead, he took something that really happened, in this case God's word to his children, and twisted and distorted it. Indeed, the lie is effective because it contained just enough truth to remain plausible. And as we know, they fell for it, and thus fell into death and suffering.

And so the war began, and it continues on today. In fact, the curses doled out by God after the invasion of sin and darkness testify to the pervasive, ongoing presence of this war. The serpent is stripped of its dignity and destined for ongoing strife between the woman and her offspring; the woman now brings life into the world through pain and is destined to a life of conflict and struggle with the very one who was meant to be her partner and support; the man is destined to futility and frustration; even the earth is cursed.³ In other words, all of creation is now destined to suffering and death. Bad things, evil things, don't just happen; they happen because we have been under attack from the beginning. They happen because the ruler of this present

² John 8:44

³ See Genesis 3:14-18

darkness, "your enemy, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour."⁴ This world that was created good and peaceful, now in its state of war offers us suffering, oppression, bondage, poverty, division, alienation from God, and ultimately death.

This is a bleak picture to be sure; however, it is not the full picture. Even in its fallen state, there still exists goodness, beauty, and truth within the cosmos, otherwise what's the point of fighting for it. If all is inherently lost already, or dare I say, totally depraved, what is there to wage war over? As the early fathers up to and through our own reformer, Richard Hooker, taught, there must be something of the goodness of creation left, or there would be nothing left to save. And so it is that we are haunted by the way things ought to be. To name only a few examples, we see it in the look of love between a new mother and her precious baby. We see it in the striking colors of a mid-summer sunset over a remote, peaceful body of water. We hear it in a great composition of music, or in the telling of a grand story of courage and honor. We even see it in the bloody realities of war when a soldier willingly lays down his life for the sake of his brothers. In fact, these hauntings of the way things ought to be makes the tragedies of this life sting all the more. But if we have the right perspective, these sufferings should also remind us that this is not the way things are supposed to be! They should remind us that we are under attack.

But there is good news, saints. Unlike the soldier wondering in shock on the beach of Normandy, we are not left alone! In the words of Moses and his sister Mariam – the likely namesake of Jesus' mother, Mary – "The Lord is a Warrior...Sing to the Lord, for he is highly

⁴ 1 Peter 5:8

exalted; The horse and his rider He has hurled into the sea."⁵ Even as God is acknowledging the sin that has invaded his creation along with its consequences through the pronouncement of curses, he slips in the promise of his own counteroffensive. Listen to his words to the serpent (if you so desire, you can find this in your pew bible on page 3): "Because you have done this, cursed are you more than all the cattle, and more than every beast of the field; on your belly you will go, and dust you will eat all the days of your life." This is the part to be really attentive to: *"And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel."*⁶

A few things for us to notice. First, notice that God is essentially declaring war; *He* will put enmity between the woman's child and the serpent. Second, and this is a free science lesson: women don't have "seed." This was well known even in the ancient world and, accordingly, this was never a normal way of speaking about a woman's fruitfulness. This should signal to us, as it no doubt did for its first hearers, something different is going on here. God is up to something; a plan is afoot. And, indeed, we know in retrospect, this is the first promise of the Virgin Birth. Third, in the course of the battle, the serpent will wound the Son, but it will not be mortal. Victory, however, will belong to the Son as he wounds the serpent on the head. We should not miss the imagery of the promise either; it is that of a man crushing the head of snake with his heel. In other words, in the very act of bruising the Son's heel, the serpent meets his own defeat.

Our readings today testify to these same elements of this first promise for salvation. Look with me at Gospel passage for today, I encourage you to look in your bible as we will be expanding the passage. You can find it on p. 1019. We need to move quickly at this point, so

⁵ Exodus 15:3, 21. There is a striking similarity between the Song of Moses here in Exodus, which is echoed by Mariam, and the Magnificat of Mary found in our Gospel passage today (Luke 1:39-49).

⁶ Genesis 3:14-15

what I want to do is read the whole thing to you, including verses 50-55, which are not part of the assigned reading but belong to the whole of Mary's hymn, and then we will reference back to parts in order to make certain observations. [Read] First, notice that baby John, who is still in Elizabeth's womb, recognizes that the baby in Mary's womb is the one whom he is to declare, and, in fact, John does so to Elizabeth by leaping in her womb. Second, Elizabeth responds to John's pre-born proclamation and the illumination of the Holy Spirit by declaring that Mary's baby is the Lord. Elizabeth recognizes that this is indeed the savior who Isaiah foretold. Third, and this is what I want to emphasize, in the portion of the hymn that is not included, Mary recognizes that God, through the coming of her baby, is waging war. Notice the language of especially verses 51 and 52 [read]. This is language to describe the Lord as a Warrior. One such ruler that the Lord brought down was Pharaoh, who in his pride and arrogance presented himself to God and his people as a type of Satan; he was their oppressive enemy. But in God's mercy, which Mary declares, the Lord reached out his mighty arm and vanquished his enemy. Thus Moses declares (and is echoed by Mary's namesake, Mariam) in Exodus 15: "The Lord is a warrior... Your right hand, O Lord, is majestic in power, your right hand, O Lord, shatters the enemy."

Mary, Elizabeth, and John all seem to recognize that Jesus is the right arm of God that is being outstretched in an act of war. Indeed, Jesus understands his own ministry this way. In Luke 4 we see Jesus announce his own ministry and purpose with the words of Isaiah 61. We could turn to Luke, but I want us to 1) see the connection between the Old Testament and Jesus, and 2) to get the fullness of what Jesus is claiming. So look with me at page 744 in your pew bibles. It's the first verse and the first part of the second verse that Luke tells us Jesus read: [read]. In these words we hear Jesus tell us that he is coming to undo the effects of the fall. Just as God reached

out his mighty arm to rescue Israel from bondage to their enemy Pharaoh, so he is working in his Son, Jesus Christ to set all of humanity free from bondage to our enemies, sin and death.

Brothers and sisters, *Jesus came on a rescue mission to set us free!* The Lord is a warrior! If you have not accepted this gift of freedom, now is the time. The first step is to acknowledge your need for deliverance and to turn to him. The second step is to obey. If this is you, let's talk after the service.

Nothing is required of any of us because Jesus has done it all. Look with me at our reading from the letter to the Hebrews, which you can find in your bulletin. Here in this reading we find a connecting point between the celebration of Christmas when we remember Jesus' birth – wherein the eternal Word of God took on human flesh – and our celebration of Easter when we remember Jesus' death and resurrection – wherein the Word made flesh delivers us from sin and death. The two go together: there is no Easter without Christmas, and Christmas is incomplete without Easter. The Church has rightly understood that by uniting divine and human nature in the one subject Jesus Christ, God has not just restored our nature to what it was before the fall, he has elevated us. Somehow, in his providence, God has taken what was meant for evil, and in his Son Jesus he has turned it on its head and made it good. Because of our union in Jesus, we are now able to be more.

Nevertheless, the author of Hebrews recognizes and explains that this is an incomplete victory. In fact, this victory cannot come to fruition unless our sin is dealt with – Christmas needs Easter. The Hebraist explains, then, that Jesus' perfect body, a body without a sinful nature or guilt, is laid down on our behalf as a sacrifice to God. "Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of world!" And so it is by allowing himself to be subjected to the Cross – that is, to have his heel bruised – and then taking up his own life in the Resurrection, the Son ultimately

crushes the head of the serpent, Satan. In paying for our sins and healing our nature, Jesus Christ sets us free from the bondage of sin and death. The Lord is a warrior!

So if God in Christ Jesus has been victorious, why do we still suffer and die? It is in the answer to this question that we find the hope of the season. Look again at Isaiah 61 on page 744 of your pew bibles. As I noted above, when Jesus read this passage in public, he stopped half way through verse 2, which reads: [read]. The implication, then, is that he came to accomplish all that proceeds the second half, but did not come to declare "the day of vengeance of our God," which is an idiom for his second coming. Make no mistake, Jesus Christ has won the victory in his first coming as we just discussed. He has inaugurated the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in Heaven, but he has not completed it...yet. Just as he came the first time in the fullness of time, so will he come again in the fullness of time. And when he does, he will come in glory to judge the living and the dead, and to make all things new. In the words of Isaiah, [read 3-4,7-8]. This is the hope of the season, the return of Jesus Christ to win the final victory, a victory that has already been won but awaits its full revelation. We are part of that revelation, saints. In our times of hurt and frustration, we look back and remember what God in Christ Jesus has already won for us. Through the eyes of faith, we know we are victorious in Christ, and we are empowered by the Holy Spirit in the authority of Christ Jesus to wage war in this world on his behalf. We are to hasten the day of his return by making disciples and baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. But those of us in Christ wage war not as the world does through the exertion of power, but through acts of love and humility just as Christ did. We are called to be the hands and feet of Christ that set our neighbors free from the bondage and pain of this world.

When I was writing this sermon, especially the conclusion, I kept feeling a song welling up within me. So, despite my better judgment, I am going to close with these words from one of my favorite Christmas hymns (a song that will be sung at my funeral a long time from now):

Truly He taught us to love one another

His law is love and His gospel is peace

Chains shall He break for the slave is our brother

And in His name, all oppression shall cease

Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we

Let all within us praise His holy name

Christ is the Lord! Oh, praise His Name forever

His power and glory evermore proclaim

Oh, night divine, oh, night when Christ was born