

First Sunday of Advent (A)

St. Joseph's Neier November 30-December 1, 2013

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Central Idea: Advent is a time for us to wake from our sleep of mediocrity.

*In days to come, the mountain of the LORD's house  
shall be established as the highest mountain and raised above the hills.*

It has been a tough climb this year.

As I have mentioned to you many times, this semester has been a bit of a challenge for me. My students have been great and their parents have been more than supportive. That is not the problem. There are a host of other things. I am teaching a subject that I have never taught before and to be totally honest, it is one that I do not have a firm grasp as how to teach it. I have taught every other aspect of the catechism, Scripture, Sacraments, Morality, but not "ecclesiology." We are in the second year of having all of our students with iPads and how to teach a "flipped" classroom. As a school we have been doing more than just a bit of soul searching about grading, what a grade means, what should count, what should not count. Throw into the whole mix my family's personal tragedy with the death of my brother and I begin to see how I have really been off my game of late. I spent 29 years learning how to teach and just when I think I am really good at it, just when I think I got it licked, along comes this year to tell me that I don't know squat!

And it may be the absolute best thing that has ever happened.

I have learned that most mountain climbing death happen, not going up the mountain, but coming down the mountain. That sounds a bit obvious, no one falls upward. To say it another way, most accidents and mishaps occurred once the climber has reached the top. The psychology of this is similarly obvious. "I reached the summit, I have made it to the top." And that's when the climber lets down his or her guard and whoosh! Bye, bye!

In my teaching, whether it was true or not, I had it figured that I had gotten to the top. My work was on "auto pilot" and life was good. Unfortunately, especially in education, if you are not moving forward, you are falling behind. In a sense, you are never quite finished, you never really make it to the summit. And if you think you are and if you think you do, be careful. It is a long, long way to fall.

What is true about mountain climbing and teaching is also true about the spiritual life.

*"Come, let us climb the LORD's mountain, to the house of the God of Jacob,  
that he may instruct us in his ways, and we may walk in his paths."*

Today we begin the season of Advent and it begins with a rather rude and blunt wake up call. Far from being a season of warm fuzzies and good feelings, Advent comes like a cold splash of water. It is a clear and unmistakable call to rouse ourselves from sleep, the sleep of mediocrity.

Let's face it, we are not bad people. We are not evil people. Most of you behave yourselves rather well. We may have our moments, but on average we are pretty good. And that is precisely when the trouble starts, that is when we get smug and self-satisfied. And that self-satisfaction is often a precursor to trouble. We need Advent, not because we are immoral and wicked. We need Advent because we are complacent and drowsy.

In Pope Francis' first exhortation, published this week, he warns us of this. We believe in Christ, no problem there, but where does that faith lead us. He writes:

*It always pains me greatly to discover how some Christian communities, and even consecrated persons, can tolerate different forms of enmity, division, calumny, defamation, vendetta, jealousy and the desire to impose certain ideas at all costs, even to persecutions which appear as veritable witch hunts. Whom are we going to evangelize if this is the way we act?*

But Francis is not just about scolding our smug, hateful selves, he is also about help and healing and hope.

*If anyone feels offended by my words, I would respond that I speak them with affection and with the best of intentions.... My words are not those of a foe or an opponent.*

Francis calls us to renew our faith and he recognizes that the surest and most authentic way to do it is outreach to the poor. He quotes St. Augustine in his letter:

*"If we were in peril from fire, we would certainly run to water in order to extinguish the fire... in the same way, if a spark of sin flares up from our straw, and we are troubled on that account, whenever we have an opportunity to perform a work of mercy, we should rejoice, as if a fountain opened before so that the fire might be extinguished".*

I will be the first to admit that this is easier said than done. Often when people call for help here at the rectory, it is obvious that one of the major reasons for their plight is their own dysfunction, especially with drugs. And yet, that doesn't quite let me off the hook.

As you can see, the climb up the mountain is difficult and complex and exhausting. But it is worth it. And at the core of that climb is openness to prayer. "The great men and women of God were great intercessors. Intercession is like a "leaven" in the heart of the Trinity. It is a way of penetrating the Father's heart and discovering new dimensions which can shed light on concrete situations and change them."

The Pope is all about joy, not condemnation. He is about waking us up from our sleep, so that we as a Church might be invigorated. He is about reaching across the boundaries that separate us.

*The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew.*

Maybe that is what this season truly calls us to amid all the hubbub of the secular holidays. To quiet ourselves in prayer, to ask the Lord for help and mercy, and to wake ourselves for the upward climb ahead.