

Homily for the Second Sunday of Advent (A)

St. Joseph's Neier

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Rev. Kevin Schmittgens

Central Idea: The life of Nelson Mandela makes us rethink almost everything about our lives.

*Then the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
the calf and the young lion shall browse together,
with a little child to guide them.
The cow and the bear shall be neighbors,
together their young shall rest;
the lion shall eat hay like the ox.
The baby shall play by the cobra's den,
and the child lay his hand on the adder's lair.
There shall be no harm or ruin on all my holy mountain;*

Wolves and lambs? Children and cobras? Cows and bears? Oh, my! The Scriptures today are more than just a bit unrealistic about nature, they are more than just a little optimistic about the food chain. Life is not a Disney cartoon. Or is it?

"It always seems impossible until it's done." -Nelson Mandela

You will hear a lot about Nelson Mandela in the next couple of days. Mandela died Thursday and the tributes to his life are flooding the airwaves and social media. Many will overly praise him. One headline called him the "Icon of Icons." Many will even say that he was a saint.

Don't believe the hype.

Now, lest you think your pastor has finally lost his quasi-liberal mind, don't take my word for it, take the word of Mandela himself. In his life, Mandela hated his public image. Like many who lived amazing lives, Mandela knew that he was merely human, fallible and weak and incredibly complicated. He was a ladies man. He was a Communist. He was friends with Kaddafi and admired Castro. He deeply criticized US policy. And yet, even his detractors have to admit what he did was nothing short of a miracle. To understand the impact that the life of Nelson Mandela made on the world, you have to understand what a pariah South Africa was before the dismantling of apartheid.

There were few countries as isolated and shunned as South Africa was. Economically, socially, in sports (they were not allowed to participate in the Olympics since 1964) and

even spiritually excluded from practically everyone else on earth. In 1988, Pope John Paul II traveled to all the countries around South Africa while avoiding the racist state. Before the International Court of Justice he proclaimed that "no system of apartheid or separate development will ever be acceptable as a model for the relations between peoples or races."

And why were they such pariahs? Well apartheid deemed that the races should be separate. No intermarriage, segregation in education, suppression of the black majority and their disenfranchisement from voting. These policies eventually lead to what was called bantustanization, or the creation of little territories set aside for blacks. At first blush, it sounds fine, independence and self-rule and all. In reality, it simply allowed for further oppression.

The situation was deplorable.

Mandela fought against apartheid and it got him thrown into jail...for 27 years.

World wide pressure started to work. Mandela was eventually freed and free elections were allowed to take place. When Mandela won in 1994, the whites feared that South Africa would collapse into chaos. It didn't. It didn't primarily because Mandela worked hard to foster reconciliation and unite the country. It happened in 1995. During the world championship for rugby, a primarily white sport, Mandela threw his support behind the team, the Springboks, a virtual symbol of apartheid and white oppression. Watch the movie *Invictus* if you don't believe me. When they won, the country cheered as one. "Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another," said Mandela.

The lion and the lamb, the child and the cobra, the cow and the bear, incredibly, laid down together.

There is much more work to be done both in South Africa and the rest of the continent of Africa. We could only wish for more leaders like Mandela, unfortunately they are few and far between. Some will say that he was a one of a kind, an icon of icons, a saint. And in doing so distant themselves from him. Mandela could do it. Mandela could be freed from jail after 27 years and be friends with his jailer. Mandela could take the hatred and oppression of apartheid and turn it into national pride and reconciliation. Mandela could do these things because he is beyond us.

To that Mandela would say: Nonsense. He knew he was only a man, filled with weakness and strength, fear and courage.

As he once said: *Do not judge me by my successes, judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again.*

May you rest in peace on God's holy mountain, where the wolf is the guest of the lamb.