

Celebrating the 4th Sunday of Advent the day before Christmas Eve as we do this year, we are reminded even more forcefully than usual that we cannot faithfully arrive at Christmas Day without completing the journey we call Advent. Even now – “Christmas Eve Eve” – we need to discipline ourselves to stop and contemplate the prophecies of Advent. To fail to do so is to impoverish not just Christmas itself but our souls.

Today’s passage from the prophecy of Micah, and the reflection upon the ancient prophecies offered in the letter to the Hebrews, present a stunning progression of warnings, admonitions, promises, even pleadings from the God of our salvation. They echo the words of other Hebrew prophets – Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah – and writers of such psalms as the 40th and 50th. The author of I Samuel similarly addresses the theme: God rejects the burnt sacrifices, the blood of bulls, the incense offerings by which the ancients sought to curry God’s favor, and is, instead, concerned with *obedience*.

In our age, this word, *obedience*, has almost become an anachronism. We think, erroneously, that it doesn’t fit in well with our modern ideas of individualism, with human rights and civil rights, commendable as these rights are in the scheme of things. We have not done very well with any of these freedoms. We have demonstrated our lack of understanding of God’s role in our lives. We have succumbed to the sin of pride and we have thrown away much that is good, specifically the notion that we are called to a life of obedience to Almighty God.

The problem may also lie in our understanding of the word *obedience*, which in English has the connotation of subservience and submission. In Hebrew, as well as New Testament Greek, the basic meaning of the word for *obedience* is “to listen to” or “to hear.” Listen to the words of the Psalmist quoted only in part by today’s passage from Hebrews: “*Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced.*” The etymology of the word *obedience* in English, though long forgotten, finds its roots in the Latin word for “to hear” or “to listen to” as well.

When you listen and hear and, based on that hearing, do as God seeks that you do, then and only then are sacrifices welcome to God. Again and again the prophets remind the Israelites of this need for listening, for heeding, for obedience. And, time and again, the chosen people of God refuse to listen. They find it much easier to perform the rituals, prepare the animals for sacrifice while forgetting that God asks only for obedience to the divine will. They offer the burnt sacrifice and they think that absolves them.

Before we rush to blame the Israelites of old, however, we need to acknowledge the same tendency in our own lives. For how many of us is worship the performing of rituals

while going our merry way ignoring God's will? For how many of us is liturgy a mind-numbing routine rather than nourishment for day-to-day obedience?

In these passages we see the progression of the story. God asks people to listen, to obey, and they refuse. God keeps sending prophets to warn them about the inevitable death that results from *not* listening, and they again refuse. Later Jesus will put this repeated refusal in his poignant parable of the wicked tenants: "*Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will surely respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, this is the heir, come, let us kill him and get the inheritance.*"

God still sends us the Son out of great love for us. And the rejection of that love continues. But in our Gospel passage this morning, we are met with the *acceptance* of God's love, which is done in *perfect obedience*. Mary, the young innocent girl who "knew no man," is visited by the angel of God and she hears and accepts. The beloved Son of God, being humbled lower than the angels, is growing within her. She goes to visit Elizabeth, her cousin, to avoid the looks and gossip of her neighbors. Elizabeth, also, has heard and accepted. By all that is natural, she should be not be carrying a child. She is too old. But her husband too, incredulous at first, has heard the voice of the angel, and has obeyed. Elizabeth accepts all this. She too knows the meaning of obedience. The two women, one young, the other older, meet and something wondrous happens.

Elizabeth is six months pregnant. She sees her younger cousin, and the child in her own womb leaps for joy. The Greek word connotes a thrill that goes through the body. A more literal rendition might be to say the child danced in her womb. Elizabeth tells Mary, "and blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." The fulfillment happened because she *obeyed*.

The two women break out into a song of praise and joy that takes into account what happens to those who obey – and those who disobey – our God. Echoing the poem of Hannah, the mother of Samuel, Mary sings, "His mercy extends to those who fear him in every generation." (For the word "fear," understand "obey.") And the contrast, "He has scattered the proud in their conceit." Pride is the sin of *not* obeying God.

Which brings us to Jesus himself.

What made Jesus different from all other human beings was his total obedience to the will of God. It starts very early. When he is 12 and Mary and Joseph lose him, only to later find him in the temple, he tells them simply, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" They do not understand; even so, he obeys them. The time has not yet come. "He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them," Luke tells us. If you follow his earthly life, on every

occasion you will hear him talk about doing the will of his Father. This is the meaning of total obedience – the obedience which led him to his death.

Jesus knows, from the very beginning it seems, what the will of God is, and he obeys, even if it means terrible rejection and suffering for him. We are often troubled about knowing what the will of God is for us in our lives. We often say, “Look, it was easy for Jesus; he obeyed because he *knew* what the will of God was.” But a closer look shows it *wasn't* so easy. Look how often he searches the Scriptures. Throughout his earthly ministry he refers again and again to the prophets. His very first sermon quotes from Isaiah. Even on the cross, he quotes one of the psalms. He found strength and revelation in Scripture.

The other constant in his life was this refrain:

- “Once when he was praying alone...”
- “He was praying in a certain place...”
- “Then he withdrew from them, knelt down and prayed.”

The references to the times he withdrew and prayed are many. That is how he knew the will of God: through prayer, through continuous communion. If we too desire to practice that total communion, it will take the discipline of prayer. Only then will we discern the will of God more readily.

During this season we have been preparing ourselves. We have been reminded by the prophets of God’s priorities for our lives; we have been warned about the futility of saving ourselves through our own efforts; and we have heard the announcement about the great love that would break forth in the Incarnation of God as the Suffering Servant. And now, as Christmas Eve arrives in but one more day, we are called to readiness to welcome the child. What kind of readiness?

- A readiness in which we become as children ourselves.
- A readiness like that of the pre-natal John, in which we dance for joy at the approach of our Lord.
- A readiness that joins with the shepherds in shedding all that would stand in the way of humility.
- A readiness that is open like the two women who in today’s Gospel meet and magnify the Lord.

If that is not yet where we are, perhaps this one last day of Advent affords us the opportunity to cast aside our pride and renew our obedience – to place ourselves in the conscious presence of the One whose great love was poured out for the world to redeem us. The time is short. Christmas is at hand. Let us, with *obedience*, be prepared to come to the manger, and with shepherds and angels, adore him.