

**2 Advent – Year C – December 9, 2009 Homily**  
**Baruch 5:1-9; Canticle 16 (Luke 1:68-79); Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6**  
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In the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd children’s program, the children learn about Jesus by wondering, through storytelling, play, and worship in their own carefully designed space called an atrium. The program is based on the Montessori method of learning, and I was privileged to be a part of this at another parish. One of the leaders shared a story about the pre-K children and their responses to the variety of spiritual gifts that God grants each of us through the power of the Holy Spirit. Out of all the different gifts like the gifts of mercy, or wisdom, when asked, the youngest children always wanted God to give them more knowledge.

In this evening’s reading from Philippians, Paul prays for the church. He gives thanks with great joy. He tells us that he is confident that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion. He prays that they may be blessed with overflowing love, knowledge and full insight. All his prayers have a purpose, that they may be pure and blameless, bearing a harvest of righteousness to the glory and praise of God. As our own Advent journey proceeds, with God’s help, we too can be more intentional in each of these areas for the sake of our own transformation and preparation for Christ’s coming.

The overarching theme in this portion of Paul’s epistle is completion of the work that Christ has begun in each of us. That is not to say that any of us can complete God’s work in and of ourselves, or even in this lifetime. Really, that is not the point. As Reinhold Niebuhr once said, “Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope.” Both Paul and Niebuhr have a deeper meaning to their words. Both affirm that our actions in this life should be directed to our hope in Christ Jesus our Lord. In always looking towards God in Christ, our actions will be God-directed and serve yet another purpose – to fill us with more of God’s love. In our prayer book, in the service of reaffirmation for those who wish to rededicate their lives to God’s service the Bishop says these words, “may the Holy Spirit, who has begun a good work in you, direct and uphold you in the service of Christ and his kingdom.” God’s greatest gift of love, in sending Jesus to be our savior evokes in each of us our lifetime response of gratitude and service to the Lord. Our hope rests in the promise of eternal life, knowing that all life comes to completion in God.

As we are realigning ourselves to God’s will during this season, we may expect the miracle of God’s love to fill us. We cannot look towards God without opening ourselves to God. And when we open ourselves to God, we are inviting more of God’s perfect love into our lives. The Greek words used by Paul here is *agape*, which is more than just relational love. It encompasses the understanding of unconditional love, and selfless love. In other words, the deepest care and concern for the other that prompts us to give of ourselves for the greater good of another person or community. It has been said that, “Love is the doorway through which the human soul passes from selfishness to service and from solitude to kinship with all [humanity].” The Scriptures also tell us that perfect love drives out fear (1 John 4:18). I have said this before, and it is worth repeating – we might all think about our own answer to the question: What would I do, if I weren’t afraid? Advent is a time for us all to wake up, and be more alert to the promptings of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Our fears are not just things like being afraid of spiders or flying. I’m talking more about our unacknowledged fears: the types of things that actually drive our actions and our inaction. It would probably be a good start to our meditations this week to consider our

fears, and think about how we might allow God's love to transform those aspects of our lives. We all need to dig deep in this respect, because our greatest fears are usually so much a part of us, that they are virtually hidden, but not to God. And so in our prayers we can ask God to reveal them to us.

There is an order to Paul's prayer. God's perfect love guides us into knowledge and insight. Just as God invites each of us to open ourselves to His love, so will we gain knowledge. That is, knowledge of our fears, greater knowledge of God, and richer insights into how God is calling us into service. At the beginning of this evening's message, I mentioned that the youngest children always want more knowledge. My personal theory, which I am quite sure is not original, is that children are much closer to God in many ways. The mess that we have made in and of God's world has not yet sullied their childlike innocence. And it seems to me that their thirst for knowledge is at least in part a desire to retain and grow in God-consciousness. In that respect, there is also another aspect to knowledge as Paul uses the word in Scripture. That knowledge is about a clearer sense of knowing what is truly valuable or important in life. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde quips, "Nowadays people know the price of everything and the value of nothing." In effect, the power of God's love leads us to set aside our fears, to develop Godly values, and not to worry so much about appearances, especially when it comes to conforming to cultural standards and values rather than focusing on pleasing God.

Finally, Paul speaks of how God's love comes full circle in the "harvest of righteousness". In other words God's love is truly brought to life through our response, both in our personal gifts of service, and as we work together as a community of faith to practice God's graciousness. Towards the end of his life, Bertrand Russell shared his reflections on *What I have lived for*. He says in part, "Three passions have governed my life: The longings for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of [humankind]. ... In the union of love I have seen in a mystic miniature the prefiguring vision of the heavens that saints and poets have imagined. With equal passion I have sought knowledge. I have wished to understand the hearts of [people]. I have wished to know why the stars shine. Love and knowledge led upwards to the heavens, but always pity brought me back to earth.... Cries of pain reverberated in my heart. Of children in famine, of victims tortured and of old people left helpless. I long to alleviate the evil, but I cannot, and I too suffer." Paul shares his own valuable insights with us for this Advent season of preparation. We too can yearn childlike for a greater closeness with God, and discover more about how God transforms us in the power of love, as we set aside our fears. How God blesses us with knowledge of what is worthwhile in life, and how we are called to respond to God's love in all that we are and do, especially in working for justice and peace for all. God leads the way to the very best for you, me, and all His children. Here then is a very special gift of the wonder of God's love for our Advent meditations.

Amen.