

**3 Advent – Year A – December 15, 2010 - Homily**  
**Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 146:4-9; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11**  
**Susan E. Wilmot**

We received a Christmas card from our good friends in Massachusetts this week. Inside was a note saying that they had received our gift, but it was under the Christmas tree and they were trying hard not to open it until Christmas. Then there was a little addendum. Our Godson's younger brother, William, is apparently full of the Christmas spirit, which I took to mean he can't wait to get into those presents under the tree!

Tonight's reading from the letter of James begins with the words, "Be patient, beloved, until the coming of the Lord." James then goes on to give us an example of a farmer who plants, tends, weeds, waters, but nonetheless still has to wait with attentive patience for the crop to grow. The reference to the early and late rains comes from Deuteronomy (11:14), and carries the meaning of a sign of God's faithfulness to His people. In the earliest days of Israel, and in the days of Jesus, the precious crops really were the difference between life and death. No wonder so many fertility cults sprung up, if you'll pardon the pun, and people like the Canaanites worshipped Baal, a fertility god. The only thing that these cults, Judaism and Christianity have in common in this respect is the acknowledgement that there are many things, including growing crops, that are largely out of our control.

The mystery of God working in our hearts, transforming us by God's graciousness, helping us to grow, instilling within us the fruit of the Holy Spirit, is a wonderful meditation for our Advent journey. It's an opportunity to give God thanks and praise, even as we are humbly repenting for our sinfulness and lack of focus. James describes the process as strengthening our hearts. In purely physical cardio-vascular terms, the heart is a muscle, and like any other muscle if it does not receive proper exercise and care, it will not be strong, nor will it function properly. In spiritual terms, we also need to take James' advice to heart – literally – and do the kind of spiritual exercises that strengthen our hearts in God, and in God's goodness.

Just like the early community that James was a part of, as disciples of Jesus, we still live under the imperative of faithfulness. Having said that, we still have to cope with all that the world throws at us, our families or work, the stresses of retirement, financial concerns, aging, and perhaps even ill health. For James' community they were experiencing the terrible pressures of being a marginalized, outcast group frequently persecuted for their Christian beliefs, and surrounded by pagan worshippers. As cultural realities have changed, we find that Christians in America, for example, are not persecuted for our faith, but we too might feel some cultural pressures. How many times have we kept quiet instead of openly sharing our love for Jesus, because of some real or perceived fear? What about the pressure to compromise our ethical values in any number of ways? Or times when we find ourselves struggling to maintain our integrity, because there may be consequences to being openly Christian in a gathering dominated by members of another religious group. Just this morning, NPR reported on the controversy surrounding a state committee. A candidate for some position had revealed his affiliation with a religious group, and was subsequently dropped from consideration. Staying strong and confident in our faith can require every moment of prayer that we offered to God as a foundation to a strong heart; every generous act in Jesus' name that has given us confidence to share our faith; as well as the spiritual disciplines that we practice faithfully for such times as these.

Pastor Joanna Adams tells the story of a woman who had, in spite of a hard life and virtually

no resources except her stamina and the strength of her faith, raised six fine children and sent them all to college. When she was asked how on earth she did it, she replied, “I saw a new world coming.” James uses the prophets as exemplars of patient endurance. I think it’s fair to say that they too saw a new world coming. How then are we to prepare for Jesus’ coming?

Even though this passage talks about the coming of the Lord as being near, that is not necessarily the same as Jesus’ imminent return. In fact, the sense of the passage is more about reminding the community that the kingdom of God is near, having been established on earth as it is in heaven, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Hence, our own mission is to continue to live faithfully in order to expand and grow the presence, depth and breadth of God’s kingdom on earth. By way of example, James writes, “do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged.”

When we are hard-pressed or anxious, it is pretty much human nature to look for someone to blame, or even a scapegoat. From God’s perspective, this kind of blaming is no better than the grumbling disputes of the Israelites in the wilderness. You remember the stories: the Israelites are freed from oppression and slavery in Egypt only to spend years wandering in the desert before they reach the Promised Land. In the meantime, they grumble against God about the food and the other hardships they have to bear. They grumbled because it was easier to grumble than to learn the lessons of obedience and faithfulness to God that would transform this group of newly freed prisoners into God’s chosen people, a beacon for God to the nations of the world. Since you and I are the face of Jesus to others in our own community and the broader community, guess what kind of picture of Jesus our grumbling portrays? And guess what we are saying about Jesus if we are judgmental towards others? As disciples of Jesus, we are His hands, feet and face in and to the world. What we say and do really does matter in helping or hindering the spread of the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ. Grumbling causes rifts and disruptions in the life of our community of faith. While we await the coming of Christ, the community of faith is all we have to support and strengthen us. Grumbling, blaming, back biting, and in fighting is like cutting off our nose to spite our face.

Growing in the fruit of patience relieves us of a lot of the anxiety and tension that can lead to grumbling and judgmentalism. After all, we are confident in the Lord’s promises. God **is** faithful and sure, so there is no need to worry about the timing of God’s will, or about the availability of resources – are there really enough presents under God’s tree? James assures us that we are God’s beloved. In Christ, there is always enough, and always enough to share. Enough love, enough food, enough money, enough patience, enough strength to endure, and enough of whatever we might think is in short supply. The purpose of the Lord’s coming is to reveal more fully God’s compassion and mercy, love, justice and equality for all, as proclaimed by the prophets. Whatever the present circumstances may or may not say, God’s purpose will be fulfilled in Christ Jesus our Lord, and that is always a reason to hold on to hope, and to celebrate with thanksgiving all the gifts of our lives, including this community of faith!

Amen.