

Homilies for the Third Sunday of Advent:

- [Experience the Joy of Salvation - Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)
- [Third Sunday of Advent, cycle C - Don L. Fischer](#)

Experience the Joy of Salvation

By [Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)

Last month I had an unforgettable experience. I was standing in front of the Capitol Building in Honolulu, face to face with the striking sculpture of Father Damien of Molokai. Damien is the famous Belgian who gave all 25 years of his priestly life to lepers—the lepers of Molokai, an island in central Hawaii. To the lepers he was not only pastor but physician and counselor, housebuilder and sheriff, undertaker and gravedigger. This is the missionary who one day in 1885, four years before he died, began his sermon with two unexpected words: "We lepers..."

The sculpture shows Damien with the disfigured face of the leper he had become. When some protested the ugliness of his features, the sculptress, Marisol Escobar, responded in accents that are carved into the pedestal. Working from photographs of the dying priest, what she saw in Damien, what she reproduced, was "the mystery of physical transformation—as if he had become what he wanted to become."

"As if he had become what he wanted to become." As I read and reread those startling syllables, my Advent sermon started to take shape. I saw in a rough sketch the three stages of this homily: (1) the puzzle that is Advent; (2) one clue to that puzzle; (3) the challenge this clue flings out to us.

I

First, the puzzle that is Advent. It is indeed a puzzle. For most Christians, Advent is unreal. Oh yes, we professionals do our best to make it real. Rome authorizes four special Sundays; liturgists organize a month of scriptural readings; parish committees fashion Advent wreaths and candles; angelic choirs implore the clouds to "rain down the just One." And still the season is strange. Not only because many of us are like cats on a hot tin roof: frantic last-minute shopping; the great grade rush; Christmas cards for all who remembered me last year. The season is strange because we are supposed to be waiting, preparing—in Luke's lovely phrase, "on tiptoe of expectation" (Lk 3:15 NEB).

But what are we waiting for? Whom are we expecting? The answer, you say, is simple: We're waiting for Christmas; we're expecting Jesus. But isn't this naive, a form of make-believe? Jesus is here.¹ He lives, first, in all the world. He is everywhere, in every nook and cranny of his universe. He has to be, because he is God the Son. Wherever you look—the sky above you, the earth beneath you, the air about you—wherever your eye falls, he is there. Not indeed with his physical body. He is everywhere because he is *active* everywhere, because without him the sun could not shine nor the snowflake fall; without

him the grass could not grow nor the seas surge; without him the skylark could not sing, the panther prowl, the shad ascend the rivers.

Jesus lives, secondly, in this church building, in the tabernacle. True, I do not see him as Mary did, bundled in straw. I do not reach for him as Peter did, walking on the waters. I do not speak to him as Dismas did, bleeding on the wood. I do not grasp him as Magdalene did, risen from the rock. I do not see the smile part his lips, the tears moisten his eyes; I do not hear the music of his voice, trace his wounds with my finger. But I know he is there, body and blood, soul and divinity. A hidden Christ, yes; for he hides his face from me. But he is there... as truly as you and I are here.

Jesus lives, thirdly, within you. Within you at that sacred moment when the Christ you offer in the Calvary of the Mass cradles within your firm fingers, nestles on your trembling tongue, rests deep inside you. Within you each and every moment, waking or sleeping, as long as you love him, as long as you have faith in his Last Supper promise: "If you love me, my Father will love you, and we will come to you and make our home with you" (cf. Jn 14:23).

Jesus is here. He lives in this enormous universe and in a tiny tabernacle, in your body and in your soul. If on Christmas Day, when angels herald his birth, you do not find him here—in your world and your church, in your flesh and your spirit—do not look for him in the crib. You will not find him there.

II

But if Jesus is so thrillingly here, can we still be waiting for him, preparing for his coming, on tiptoe of expectation? Yes indeed! My second point suggests a clue to the Advent puzzle. You may have missed it a quarter hour ago; it was hidden in the opening prayer of today's liturgy: "Lord God, may we, your people, who look forward to the birthday of Christ, experience the joy of salvation. Experience it. The heart of Advent is a single word: experience.

You know as well as I how living experience differs from abstract knowledge, from book learning, from simply hearing about something, talking about it, looking on from the sidelines. I preach about marriage—eloquently, enthusiastically; but only you who live it can feel what marriage is, swirl in its currents and drown in its depths, actually touch its heavens and its hells. It's one thing to watch Redskin Riggins burst off tackle; it's quite another thing to hit that line yourself. If I want to sell you on Oysters Rockefeller or Veal Piccata, I don't hand you a recipe; I let you smell it, taste it, savor it. If you are to grasp the horrors of the Holocaust, it's not enough to read "six million were exterminated"; you must see the gas ovens, the mountains of human bones. To appreciate Handel's *Messiah*, the score is not enough; you have to drink it in with your ears. Naked knowledge is not unimportant, but it's only a beginning. You know best when you are one with what you know: with the things of God, with the people of God, with God Himself. You know best when you love.

And so it is with Advent, so it is with the Lord Jesus. It is one thing to know intellectually, to be convinced, to believe that Jesus is in the general area—hidden in a Host or "hanging out" in Healy Circle; that he may even be inside you, closer to you than you are to yourself. It is quite another thing to be aware of his presence, feel it, sense it, thrill to it, shiver with it. I take it that most of you have been in love, perhaps still are. Do you

remember the early days, that unbelievable first day? Didn't you tremble in the presence of "the other"? At that initial lovers' touch, didn't you go slightly or thoroughly mad, forget who you were and where you were, lose some of that iron self-control we rational animals prize so highly?

This is what Advent hopes to accomplish: to take Jesus out of the catechism, out of theology, out of the tabernacle, and have him touch you, have you touch him. He is indeed here, all around you, deep inside you; but that is simply not enough. He did not take your skin, walk your dust, die your death so that you might know him like a chemical formula, a historical event, a dogma to be memorized, a creed to be recited after the homily. He became all that you are, hid the glory that was his as God, that you might experience him somewhat as you experience the man or woman dearest to you in all the world—with understanding and passion, with laughter and tears, with anxiety when he seems far from you, with delight when he shows his face again.

That, my friends, is Christmas, whatever the day: when Christ is born for you. Not as a baby cuddled in straw, but as a living, throbbing God-man, the risen Christ, held lovingly in your mind and heart. And this is Advent, whatever the season: when you strain and sweat to make a living Christ come alive, when you mirror the maiden in the Old Testament Song of Songs:

I sought him whom my soul loves;
I sought him, but found him not;
I called him, but he gave no answer.
I will rise now and go about the city,
in the streets and in the squares;
I will seek him whom my soul loves.
(Cant 3:1-2)

This is Advent: actively waiting, intensely preparing, on tiptoe of expectation, to experience the joy that is Jesus.

III

All of which leads into my third point. If one clue to the Advent puzzle is experience—experience of a living Christ—what concrete challenge does this fling out to us? This brings us back to our beginning, the statue in front of the Capitol building in Honolulu, the sculpture of Father Damien—Damien as leper. I mean in particular the words carved into the pedestal: "as if he had become what he wanted to become." And what was that? A leper with lepers; Christ as Christ looked on Molokai, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah: "He had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him" (Isa 53:2).

If your Christmas is to be an experience of Christ, you must first answer honestly a tough Advent question: What do you want to become? Not primarily, what profession: doctor or lawyer, banker or broker, priest or politician? No, the crucial Advent question is: Over and above your workaday vocation, at the very depths of your personhood, precisely as a man or woman baptized into Christ, what do you want to become? Only you can answer the factual question; you are the world's supreme authority on what in fact you want to become. I can do no more than suggest what you *should* want to become.

Very simply, you should want what Damien wanted. Oh, not to become a leper; God rarely calls a man or woman to that. And even becoming a leper was, for Damien, not top priority, not the be-all and end-all of his mission on Molokai. Leprosy was a means to an end. Leprosy made it easier for him to identify with his flock, easier to become brother to the leprous Christs he touched 24 hours a day.

What Damien wanted above all to become was what St. Paul preached to the Galatians: "My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you" (Gal 4:19). Here each of us confronts a critical Christian question: Do you want, more than anything else in creation, do you want Christ to be formed in you? Do you want to become Christ?

This is not pious poetry, Jesuit twaddle. When I say "become Christ," I do not mean: Get yourself born in a stable, grow up in a hick town, sell your Toyota for a pair of sandals, teach from a hilltop and heal all manner of malady, end your days on a criminal's cross. This is sheer physical resemblance. To become Christ today, in your world, means to mirror his way of looking, his way of loving, his way of laughing.

His way of looking: "Blessed are the poor in spirit and the pure in heart; blessed are the meek and the merciful; blessed are they who thirst for righteousness and make peace" (cf. Mt 5:3–9). His way of loving: "Love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 15:12)—a love without condition or restriction, for the just and the unjust, the likable and the unlovable, color and race be damned—ready to die for each of them. His way of laughing: a joy in living, in being alive, in sharing the very life of God; constantly discovering life as he did, in a glance or a touch, in sailing clouds or waving wheat, in the newborn and the careworn, even in a garden called Gethsemane.

Good friends: If your Advent or your Christian existence calls for some adrenalin, I prescribe Escobar's statue of Damien. You need not fly to Honolulu. I've discovered, to my embarrassment, that a replica stands several miles from here: in the National Statuary Hall on the House side of the U.S. Capitol. Fix your eyes on that face, not so much disfigured as transformed. Then lower your gaze to the base, and mull over "the mystery of physical transformation—as if he had become what he wanted to become." Keep yearning for this—to become Christ, to look and love and laugh the way he did—keep struggling for this, and your Advent will turn remarkably real. Keep struggling for this, and one day Advent will turn into Christmas: You will "experience the joy of salvation." Experience it. He will show his face to you. At that moment you will discover why the Christ who became you is the Christ you want to become.

From *Lovely in Eyes Not His* © 1988 Paulist Press.

Third Sunday of Advent, cycle C

By [Don L. Fischer](#)

SCRIPTURE: Zephaniah 3:14-18a; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:10-18

I still feel the sense of "beginning" in these weeks of Advent. We are starting the new liturgical year. Any time we go through a beginning, it is a good time to reflect upon the work. One of the things that struck me the other day as I was thinking about the work we

share, this spiritual growth we long for, is how it is somehow deepened and strengthened by repetition. By going through these mysteries over and over and over again. If I imagine that we reach an age of reason (the age at which the Catholic Church teaches we can receive the Eucharist because we are aware of things more than we would be before the age of seven) and whatever consciousness level we have at that time, I can look back on my life of having fifty-three years of going through this cycle. This is my fifty-third time. What I imagine is happening to me, slowly, sometimes imperceptibly, only noticed when I go back and see where I might have been ten or fifteen years ago - is that I am changing. This cycle changes us. What is exciting to me as I grow older is that it is not so much what we learn in terms of intellectual knowledge or linear thought.

One of the things that changes us most effectively and move us into this place called the kingdom of God is experience. We need experiences. That's why the liturgy is such an integral part of our tradition, why we go back over and over again to a celebration that is repetitious in the sense of the same words being used week after week. And yet, going through that experience does something to us. It's why gathering together in prayer and worship - no matter what the denomination - is an experience that changes us. We're looking at characters in these stories that have had a series of experiences. John the Baptist is a major figure in this third Sunday of Advent. There is a theme in this third Sunday; it is the theme of joy. The color of the vestment changes slightly from purple to pink. It's all about simply pausing in this season of preparation for the coming of Christ to think about how wonderful this coming is, in the sense of what it creates for us. What the experience of Jesus coming into the world has done. The most overriding aspect of this, something that we hear in the readings today, is that the coming of Jesus takes away fear. It takes away fear. Now, let's go back to John the Baptist for a moment. He had his own experiences. He went out into the desert and lived with a community of believers who were seeking spiritual depth, spiritual insight. He came back from the experience in the desert clothed the way this community clothed themselves. John the Baptist comes onto the scene and proclaims something extraordinary: He proclaims that we are about to experience something extraordinary. His role is to be a prophet, to announce something new that is coming. I'm not sure he understood fully all that he was announcing. There are times you can feel in John the Baptist's ministry that he is confused about what Jesus is about, what he is really doing. The one thing John the Baptist had clearly in his mind is that he was going to be used by God to bring about something wonderful. He had to speak something wonderful. He was a prophet. It had been a long time since Israel had had a prophet. John comes onto the scene with great energy and enthusiasm. He is trying to convince people there is something coming. His role of preparing them for what is coming is to make them see where they are, to turn on a light bulb, that they are in many ways living a way of life that isn't as fulfilling as they wished.

I think the most exciting thing about the truth is how it sets us free. So often, we have gotten caught in living a pattern of life where we are hoping that certain ways of life are going to bring us the kind of joy, peace and wholeness they seem to promise. But we may only discover that those things, if they are not according to our nature or are not really true, leave us experiencing a kind of emptiness. We have anxiety. We have fear. In the first reading from the prophet Zephaniah, we hear an invitation for the people to get excited, to have an experience of communal joy and enthusiasm for something that is about to happen. One of the lines in this reading is wonderful. God promises to do two things - to take away judgment and to destroy enemies. To take away judgment and destroy enemies. I wonder if this isn't simply trying to point out that these two elements create a lot of fear in our lives. I don't necessarily want a light bulb to come on in a dark

room if I am very comfortable in that room and I am engaged in something I don't necessarily want to look at as clearly as I need to. I don't want to see where I am or what I am doing, or what illusions I am caught in. There is fear and anxiety of being discovered, of being found out. I think one of the reasons we fear it is because along with the recognition that we have done something wrong or have been engaged in something that isn't really good is the image of punishment. The image of judgment and condemnation. The statement that we are no good. If we are willing to see, if we are open to the process, there ought to be a crowd of people standing around and cheering: "He sees." "She sees." "He understands." "She understands." It takes incredible courage. Isn't it interesting that in our culture when someone is exposed it's always as if there is a kind of judgment: "How can that person be so crummy and so bad." Or whatever. Look at the way when any public figure is exposed. It's like this shocking, terrible thing, implying that there is no real darkness inside of these roles that the world invites us to take on. These roles may be caring for people, be it politically or educationally or in ministries.

Isn't it a shame that there isn't enthusiasm and joy that comes from things being broken open? That's the only way they can be healed. That's the only way they can be transformed. That's the only way they can become something and we can become something better. Look at the reading from Paul. It has the same theme: "The Lord is near." I'd like you to imagine that whenever we say "the Lord is near," the light is coming, it is about seeing and being aware and conscious. When that sort of thing happens, Paul tells us, "Have no anxiety about anything." Paul tells us to pray, ask for help, and to be extremely thankful. And then, an enormous peace comes over us. These images of the work of the spiritual journey, the work of breaking things open and being able to see, are the primary message that John the Baptist came into the world to announce. "I want you to stop doing the things that are wrong and start doing the things that are right." One of the fascinating things about John's ministry - and about Jesus' ministry - is who listened. In a way, John was very concerned about the religious leaders of the time, as was Jesus. They really wanted to convert those who were in the business of forming the consciousness of people. They had the hardest time reaching those people. The "honored ones" in the culture, the ones who were held in very high esteem, were the ones who had the hardest time looking at any shadow or any darkness in their lives. It's fascinating to me that the ordinary folk, the fringe folks, the outcasts, the hated ones, were in the disposition to face their darkness. They were able to face what they were doing that was wrong. And to question what they were doing.

It's interesting how the message of Christ always seems to come to the outcast, to the outsider. Let's look at these three groups who come to John and ask the same question. It's really the focus of what John is about. John wants people to change their behavior. He wants change to happen. He does it by simply saying, "This is what you're supposed to do." A crowd comes up, a symbol of the average person asking, "What should I do?" John says they have to be more concerned about their brothers and sisters and their needs. If you've got an extra coat in your closet, you ought to share that with somebody. If you have some extra food, you should share it with someone if you know they are hungry. John is asking people to increase their consciousness of the needs of their brothers and sisters. And then, all of a sudden, a tax collector comes up - those awful, hated tax collectors. They are coming for a baptism and they ask, "What shall we do?" John simply says, "Stop being greedy. Stop demanding more than what is really required." There was so much corruption in that system. People were gouging others out of greed. John tells the tax collectors to just do their jobs. If a tax is required, that's fine. No one likes to be taxed, especially by a foreign power as these people were being taxed. He's just saying that they

shouldn't be greedy. Then soldiers come up and ask what they should do. John tells them they should not practice extortion, not using excessive force. And they should be truthful in their accusations. I love this line: "Be satisfied with your wages." Things haven't changed much over the centuries! "Be content with your work." In all of these, John is asking people to be more conscious of the needs of their brothers and sisters, that they be very careful of their greed and their use of power. Violence was such a major problem in the world at this time, and Jesus came to institute a different system. John does his work primarily by telling people what to do.

When Jesus comes along, he does something very different. This is the heart of the message today. When Jesus comes along, his fundamental invitation is for them to do the same things John is asking them to do. He wants people to be sensitive and generous and gentle. John was not able to do for the people he was asking to change what Jesus was able to do for them. It's symbolized in the baptism. John has a baptism with water, a symbol of cleansing, of washing the dirt that has accumulated. Jesus comes along with another kind of baptism, of fire and spirit. There is the image of wheat and chaff being separated. What I want you to feel with me is that the experience of Jesus (based on all the marvelous things that the Old Testament has asked us to do) becoming reality in the New Testament is not so much a new way of being and acting. It is about a radically new way of getting to the place where you act a different way.

It's about inner transformation, an experience that Jesus goes through, and he invites us all to go through and experience the benefits. We are then different. I love this image. It helps me when I really don't want to follow the law and yet feel I have to. There is a burden and struggle in that. I know what happens when I have an insight, when I see something, when I have been changed on the inside. I no longer want to break the law, so, therefore, it does not become an issue. That's why Paul says we no longer have to worry about the law because our hearts have been changed. Whatever that is inside of us that needs to be purified - the image of taking the wheat and burning out the chaff - is involved in this whole mystery of redemption. It's what Jesus came into the world to do. Jesus himself went through an experience that we experience with him, and it is radically transformative. It seems that the season of Advent and this particular day is focused on the joy we should feel that something has finally been done for us to enable us to move in the direction of a new life, a new way of being. It's an exciting image. It's an exciting promise. It says that all we have to do is open ourselves to the power and transformative love of this Savior who enters into us and does the extraordinary interior work. This Savior changes our level of consciousness, opens us up to see things we never saw before. And then, having seen them, being able to enter into a way of living that is extraordinarily free of those things that cause pain and suffering, those things that leave us empty and longing for more.

© 2001, Don L. Fischer

Printed by Liturgy.com™

© OCP 2003-2009, All Rights Reserved.