

## Fourth Sunday of Advent

2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a-16

Romans 16:25-27

Luke 1:26-38

A few years ago a song called "From a Distance" did well on the pop charts. I'm sure many people were happy about this, because "From a Distance" is about God, and God's relationship with humanity. But "From a Distance" is not a Christian song. The title itself tells us that. The Christian understanding of God is not that of a divine being watching the activities of people "from a distance." The Christian God is not a God who got the universe going and then retired to some heavenly perch to keep an eye on everything. No, the God revealed to us through Jesus Christ is one who is present and intimately involved in all of God's creation.

Today's gospel is about nothing less than the union of the human and the divine, made possible through the "yes" of a young Jewish girl over 2000 years ago. But stories in the Old Testament tell us of God's spirit entering into a person, or of the mountains and the desert as privileged places for encounters with God. Even the sea, that realm of chaos in ancient thought, was filled with God's creatures.

Signs of the presence of God are everywhere in creation. How many people have recognized God in the beauty of a sunrise or sunset? That's pretty obvious. How about discerning the presence of God in the immense variety of landscapes on earth, in the number of stars beyond counting in the universe, in the miracle of life in all of its forms? Last week there was a cardinal sitting in my forsythia bush. Such a little creature, but he was being all that God wanted him to be, and I have to believe that a bit of God's life was in him. And this was equally true of the half dozen or so house sparrows, who were also sitting in my forsythia bush, even if they weren't that incredible shade of red.

And we should rejoice in God's presence in each other. There is a spark of the divine in every human being, unless a person has chosen to extinguish it. Those of us who are baptized are explicitly called to carry on the mission of Jesus. We are called to imitate Mary's example in saying yes to God. But what does today's gospel tell us about doing Jesus' work? After all, the birth of the Son of God as a human being was a unique, once and for all event. The message here for us, however, is that we too can give birth to Jesus. We too can help bring a more visible presence of God to the world.

Some examples:

Angelo Roncalli, elected pope in 1958 was expected to be an interim leader of the Church. Most people who reach their late 70's assume that their greatest achievements are behind them. His were still ahead. It was Pope John XXIII who called the Second Vatican Council, which gave Catholics, and other Christians as well, as vision of faithful discipleship in the modern world.

Pope John Paul II, began the World Youth Days, where he encouraged millions of young people to bring Christ into the world. His own courage and persistence helped keep the faith alive in his native Poland, and it would not be surprising to learn that he had a significant role in bringing an end to European Communism. As a young man trying to survive under Nazi occupation and dreaming of becoming a priest, could he have imagined what God was calling him to do?

Closer to home there's Spencer, a member of the coin club in Rochester. We haven't seen much of Spence since his retirement. He's been in Kenya helping to build a hospital. At a recent meeting of the club he told us that we wouldn't be seeing him for two more years. He's going back to Kenya to teach. He does this because of his faith in Jesus Christ, and I think he's helping to bring Jesus into the world. And while we're at it, what about all the priests from Kenya and other countries in Africa who have come to North America to serve in our churches, reminding us that Christianity truly is universal?

And look at all of ministries begun this year at Assumption! These include the Resurrection Choir, the garden club, the Baptism visiting team, the children's Mass planners, the Sunshine Couriers, and the folks who are putting on receptions after our funerals. Are they not, like Mary, saying yes to God's call?

And there's my mom. In her 80's she took up community activism and was instrumental in keeping a branch of the public library in her local mall, when its existence was threatened by the mall's reconstruction. Now my mother doesn't really believe in the Christian God, but I think God believes in her!

A little, or not so little postscript to all of this. If we believe that human beings and the earth and the universe live within God and are saturated with God; if we believe that we can experience God's presence in the world; and if we are called to give birth to the divine, what about evil, which also seems to be everywhere and which has increased exponentially in the last century? What about evil? I struggle with that. I do not believe in a God who has cute little plans that involve, for example, the terrible suffering of children as part of some bigger picture, which we'll all understand some day. I do believe God is with us, even when he seems most absent. He's not sitting at a distance. But still I struggle.

Here is one more story. On December 7<sup>th</sup>, a few years ago, William Gulas, a much-loved Catholic priest in Cleveland, Ohio, was murdered. He was the Franciscan pastor of an inner city parish with a large Polish American population--St. Stanislaus, what else? He did so much for his people, for the neighborhood, for the community. And his life was violently ended by a staff member who had been fired, but was being kept on until he could find a place to live. Here it would seem that evil overcame good. But I would argue that the good Gulas did, did not die with him, could not be killed. The good he did lives on. And it will multiply, as other people, inspired by him, continue Mary's legacy of bringing God into the world.

This week my husband John and I received a Christmas card, which is yet another reminder of the God who is with us. "I am in all things," it says. "I am in the earth, the sky, and the very heart of creation. I am in all seasons and all times. Wherever there is life, I am."