

"A New Kind of Holiness"

6.Dec.09

2nd Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 35:8-9; 1 Peter 1:13-16 (Lev 11:44, 20:26)

Rev. Terry Rothermich

A True Story: In October 1979 Pope John II visited the United States. Planning the trip was a daunting task. Among the details were some curiosities, like the following.

In Chicago, the nations largest Roman Catholic archdiocese, officials preparing for the pope's arrival discovered that the local "papal throne" was missing; an extremely serious thing! It is customary in the Catholic church for each archdiocese to maintain a "throne room" should the pope ever visit. Since no pope had visited the city before, the "throne room" in then Cardinal John Cody's residence had been turned into a meeting room. The week before the Pope's arrival, workmen were installing a platform for the throne itself. But then the local church officials panicked! No one knew what happened to the throne. Eventually it was found...hidden away in a dingy storage room at a nearby Catholic college, along with other discarded items.

The writer who relates this true story suggests there is a parable here. He calls it, "The Parable of the 'No One Could Remember What Had Happened to the Throne.'" He then goes on. "The personal tragedy of many of us is that we have no throne room in our lives. Or, we sit upon the throne of our own lives. Or, as Christians, we proclaim Jesus Lord but [hesitate reckoning] with who He really is...and what He requires..." (from "*The Preacher's Commentary*," Vol 31, p. 271).

In this Advent Season our thoughts hopefully wander to the question of exactly who this Son of God is Who brought His throne to earth. If I were to answer right now, it would be to say that He is "...the bringer of a new king of holiness."

So, given this I have come to a decision. I can't do it. I give up! Besides, no one really *expects* me to do it. At least I don't know of any of you who expect me to do it. Maybe my seminary professors expected me to do it at exam times. Don't know; didn't ask! So. Hasta luego! Bye bye, Birdie! It's impossible; not in the realm of human capability! If you wish, call a meeting of the Personnel Committee! Do anything to me. But *please*, do not expect me to do this!

Please understand. I am more than happy to work over time. Spend hours in a hospital waiting room. Sit with and pray for someone I don't know in the Hospice Wing at the hospital. Try to prepare adequate, if not occasionally noteworthy, sermons at least fifty-two times a year. I am more than happy to work with Ministry Teams. Dream and vision. Try to lead, nurture, and encourage. Serve on wider Area ministries. Pray for people. Marry people and bury other people. Love as many of you as I can, as well as I can. I am more than willing to help Memorial build a new future, reshape programs, reinvigorate worship, reconstitute mission work, redesign documents and structures, and celebrate faith. But this *other* thing? Well...I just quit! You cannot ask me to do this. It's not fair God should ask me to do this. So, "Vaya con Dios"... 'cause I'm on the next bus to Puerto Vallarta!

Yet you come to my rescue and ask, "Hold on, Terry. Just a New York minute. *What* is it you can't do that's getting you so stirred up that you want to quit?" I answer: "This *holiness* thing. Not only does God want me to be holy, but so does Jesus!"

God says it repeatedly. In Leviticus 11, God says, "For I am the LORD your God; sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy..." (v. 44). And again in Leviticus 20, "You shall be holy to me; for I the LORD am holy, and I have separated you from the other peoples..." (v. 26). Moreover, In John 5:48 so does Jesus, "Be perfect, therefore, as your Heavenly Father is perfect." In other words, "be holy"! As if this were insufficient, St. Paul tells us we are "saints" and "holy ones" (*Rom 1:7*). And *then* he tells the Christians in Ephesus to "...be imitators of God"...! (*Eph 5:1*).

For heaven's sake! How in the world am I who am imperfect expected to be holy? This is what I mean. Impossible! So I throw in the towel.

But on the other hand, let's hit the breaks for a minute. Now that I think about it, it does seem credible that at the coming of the Messiah God appears to see "holiness" in a new light. One could make the case that when God's Son came to earth, He brought with Him a new kind of holiness. After all, God hints at this in the Isaiah passage,

"A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; but it shall be for God's people. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there." (*from Isa 35*)

Most of us probably liken "holiness" to "separateness" and "aloofness." The holiness of God in the Old Testament looks like this. The Ark of the Covenant carried the Divine presence of God, so it was housed in the Holy of Holies in the temple, and it was available *only* to the High Priest, and only once a year. A cadre of other priests kept the people and the world separated from God's holiness. God seemed OK with the Temple priests standing between God and God's people. It was the way the Hebrews dealt with the extreme holiness of God—let it be separated out.

God gave "holiness" only to the priests. They were commanded by God to wear a headband called a "mitre." God told them to engrave on this "mitre" the words "holiness to the LORD," upon a flattened piece of gold rather like a medallion. Then place it on the front of the headband so it hung down onto the forehead. This literal "sign" allowed each priest to come into the near presence of HOLY God without fear (*Ex. 28:37*). But none of the regular people were to come into (or approach) God's nearness...God's holiness. God was pure and holy, and the world was not. Hence the need for separation.

Well to say the very least, the Advent of Christ changed all that.

Born in a barn...surrounded by soiled hay, and dirt, and unclean animals...

Born of dubious parentage...without the benefit of a completed marriage.

Born to be *first* seen, and honored, and perhaps even touched, by common, lowly shepherds...and then by Magi of curious reputation.

Born into a world of scandal, corruption, common-ness, and imperfection.

One writer put it this way, "With sledgehammer blows, all of the traditional taboos are broken. Our understanding of holiness is forever altered." (*W. Robert McClelland, "The Scandal and the Star," p. 44.*)

Now, "Immanuel," "God With Us," is other than Holy God among the angels.

"Immanuel," the Christ Child, is *now* holiness *in the world* and, in part, totally human.

With "Immanuel," holiness is *now* not just about strength and power and majesty, but weakness, and suffering, and servanthood.

Now, holiness is not separated out of the world, but placed directly in the middle of it...on the by-ways and highways; in backyards and work places and alleyways. THIS is the new kind of holiness Jesus brought, and it is embedded in us and our world.

Today's scripture from Peter's first letter says, "...as He who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." Here's the twist. The be in "You shall be holy" has an unusual sense in ancient Greek. It means "to be made."

"You shall *be made* holy." We shall *be made* holy, by God's will and wish.

The Advent of the "Christ child" made this possible. To use a phrase from a few weeks ago, what kind of amazing radical hospitality is this? But again the question, "How in the world are you and me to be made holy?" Perhaps that is one of the mysteries of Advent. Yet let us bear one thing in mind. Loving parents only expect a child to do something which the parents knows the child is capable of doing. A caring teacher or mentor only expects someone to do what she or he is capable of doing...what she or he "has in them" to do.

It follows suit, then, that God (as a loving parent) and Christ (as a caring teacher) only expect of us what they know we have the capability to do. The "Child in the Manager" would grow to show us we can be made holy and are being made holy by God's grace and benevolence if we surrender ourselves totally to Christ.

Out of unimaginable love and concern, God surrendered God's self to us in Bethlehem. This season reminds us we can do likewise.