

Homily for the 2nd Sunday of Advent

The Bible tells the story of two brothers whose father was Abraham. The first was born outside of marriage. Abraham's wife, Sara, could not bear children. This first brother was the child of her servant. His name was Ishmael. And he was very good.

The second brother was the miraculous gift that God gave to Abraham and Sara in their old age. His name was Isaac. He also was very good.

Envious of the child of her servant, Sara had Ishmael and his mother banished. So began the conflict between the two sons of Abraham. That conflict between the children of Israel, the Jewish nation, and the children of Ishmael, the Arab world, has raced through history.

So it was in the year 733 BC. The prophet Isaiah experienced that conflict as it played out in his own time. The children of Ishmael had conquered the children of Israel and brought them into captivity. The nation of Israel lay barren like a forest cut down in its prime. Isaiah looked at this barren forest and imagined a new world.

Isaiah used the image of a shoot springing from a barren stump. This shoot was the new leader, the savior, the one who would lead them into a new world. This savior would be like no other ruler, no other king

because he would be filled with the “spirit of the Lord”. In the literature of the time this “spirit of the Lord” was that rare gift given only in a time when situations and conflicts were beyond the capacity of human leadership to solve.

In Isaiah’s vision this leader, filled with “the spirit of the Lord,” would herald a time when the children of Israel and the children of Ishmael would no longer be at war. Under the guidance of this new leader all that is opposed shall become as one. The child shall play with the poisonous snake and the lion shall lay down with the lamb. No harm, no ruin will happen for the knowledge of God shall cover the world as the waters cover the sea.

It is John the Baptist who beckons this vision of Isaiah when he tells us that it is time to prepare the way for this leader that is filled with “the spirit of the Lord.” And John does not speak of the past. John speaks of the present.

John cries out to us that it is time for us to prepare for the one who comes in God’s name. It is time for the kingdom of God’s peace to be born into our world.

And I speak not of Christmas mangers and tinsel trees. I speak of God coming into a world that has become filled with hatred and disdain. I speak of God coming into our world...a world where the

children of Israel and the children of Ishmael still continue to battle and shed blood. I speak of God shining through the darkness of the conflicts we find in Iraq, in Afghanistan, in Africa, in our own cities and even in our own families...so many conflicts that seem to be beyond our capacity to solve. I speak of Christ who comes to baptize us in the Spirit so that we might learn to welcome one another, forgive one another, support and live in harmony with one another. I speak of the hope that Paul writes about and how people who depend on God are helped by God.

Advent is not the shopping season of the year. Advent is the time to remember that we live in dark times. It is time to prepare a way for the One who can save us and bring us the light of peace. And we prepare a way not by looking out and complaining how awful the world is. Rather, we prepare by looking into our own hearts and discovering how far we have strayed from the vision of Isaiah.

The legacy of Isaac and Ishmael call us to heed the words of the prophet Isaiah, of the apostle Paul and of John who is called the Baptist. We are called to prepare a way so that the violence and terrorism, the bloodshed and the war might come to an end. We are called to prepare a way in our hearts for the coming of the One who is called the Prince of Peace...the one who is filled with the “spirit of Lord” for He alone can save us.

