

2nd SUNDAY OF ADVENT – C (December 5, 2021)

In the three and a half years I have been here at Holy Rosary Cluster, you have learned a number of things about me—one of which is that I'm a bit of a history nut, and I have been for a long time. I majored in history at Iowa State (that very fine institution; see, there's another thing you've learned about me...), and I still enjoy doing such reading. Not everyone shares that interest, to be sure, but it really is important to have at least some knowledge and awareness of our past so as to help us better understand where we are now and where we are going.

I mention this because our Christian faith is all about history; it is steeped in history. Our faith is founded on God's creation of everything and everyone, and on his direct involvement in human history at very specific times and in very particular places. Other religions throughout human history have professed belief in various gods and kinds of gods, but none who were ever claimed to have intervened so directly in human history as did and as does the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—the God of Moses, the Ten Commandments, the Promised Land, and the prophets. Today's first reading from Baruch and the responsorial psalm, for example, refer to a critical time in the history of the Chosen People, the Jews. About 600 years before the birth of Jesus they had been conquered, Jerusalem was destroyed, and they were taken into captivity by the Babylonians.

This new church year is Year C in the three-year cycle of Sunday readings, and the gospel of St. Luke is the primary focus. At the very beginning of his gospel he explains how he carefully gathered information and testimony from reliable eyewitnesses to Jesus' life, words and deeds. Luke was a physician, but he also would have made a good historian with his concern for accuracy. His attention to detail is certainly on display in today's gospel. Luke introduces John the Baptist, and he situates the beginning of John's public ministry and preaching during the governorship of Pontius Pilate and the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas—men who were directly involved in Jesus' crucifixion and death. Luke mentions other historical figures as well such as Herod and the emperor Tiberius Caesar.

In providing all this historical detail, it's obvious that St. Luke wanted his readers to give special attention to this John the Baptist figure—he who wore a camel's hair garment and ate locusts and wild honey—and to what he said and did. John's primary task was to 'prepare the way of the Lord', to direct the people's attention to Jesus who would very soon begin his own public life and work. And how did John do this? Luke tells us in today's passage that he "proclaim[ed] a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins". This was not what we now have as the sacrament of baptism; the sacraments were instituted by Jesus himself later on.

And what John's preaching looked forward to, Jesus' work and preaching brought to fruition and fulfillment. He came to reconcile us to the Father and to make eternal joy possible for us once again. That reconciling was necessary because of another bit of history, and a very sad and destructive one it was and is: the entrance of sin into the world with the willful disobedience of our first parents. It has been rightly said that original sin is that one doctrine of the Christian faith for which there is the most empirical evidence. History shows all too clearly the reality of that sin and its effects—wars, violence, murder, injustice, slavery, and so many others. Our current headlines and history relate the same sad story—the recent school shooting in Michigan,

the man who drove his vehicle through a parade in Waukesha, Wisconsin and killed a number of people, and way too many other such tragedies.

We hear such stories and we shake our heads in sadness and maybe with anger as well—“how could people do such evil and horrible things??” But John the Baptist’s call for repentance, and Jesus’ later call to conversion is directed to everyone, every single one of us...and not only to the perpetrators of evil who are in the headlines. I’ve spoken about Luke’s attention to historical accuracy in his gospel and about God’s action on behalf of his people throughout salvation history.

But what about our own personal history? Am I conscious and gratefully aware of God’s presence and action in my own circumstances, in the details of my own lives and that of my loved ones? What is the history of my relationship with God and with others? Does the history of my own life indicate that I am growing closer to Jesus and in my love for him? Or does my personal history show that I’m merely treading water and content to stay in a holding pattern—offering an occasional “Our Father” or “Hail Mary” and not much more than that? Or do I deliberately and intentionally hold on to my favorite sins and give in to my favorite temptations...simply because I’d rather do so than to engage in the challenge of repentance and conversion to which Jesus calls me?

As we noted last weekend, this season of Advent is not only about preparing to celebrate Jesus’ birth—it’s also about preparing for his coming again into our world to bring to eternal fulfillment all he accomplished through the Paschal Mystery. We don’t all have to enjoy reading or learning or studying history books. But we do need to be aware of our own history—how we relate to God and others, our willingness or unwillingness to change those attitudes and patterns of conduct that we know in our heart of hearts are not what Jesus wants for us. Let’s each one of us take a good, honest look at our own history—where we have been, where we are, and where we are going. Let’s not be afraid to imitate St. Luke’s desire for accuracy and his attention to detail as we examine our own lives, our own history of being the follower of Jesus that we claim to be. And for those parts of our personal history that we aren’t proud of—that we shouldn’t be proud of—let’s turn to Jesus for the forgiveness we need and that he surely wants to extend to us. And there is no better way to do so than confession—the sacrament of reconciliation. There are many opportunities to do so especially during this holy season. Don’t be afraid of it.