

HOMILY FOR THE 4th Sunday of Advent
Sunday, 20 December 2020

- Fr. Jim Fredericks

Part One: the readings for the day
Part Two: reflection on the readings
Part Three: guidelines for *lectio divina*

PART ONE: READINGS FOR THE DAY

Lectionary: 11

Reading 1 2 SM 7:1-5, 8B-12, 14A, 16

When King David was settled in his palace,
and the LORD had given him rest from his enemies on every side,
he said to Nathan the prophet,

“Here I am living in a house of cedar,
while the ark of God dwells in a tent!”

Nathan answered the king,

“Go, do whatever you have in mind,
for the LORD is with you.”

But that night the LORD spoke to Nathan and said:

“Go, tell my servant David, ‘Thus says the LORD:
Should you build me a house to dwell in?’”

“It was I who took you from the pasture
and from the care of the flock

to be commander of my people Israel.

I have been with you wherever you went,
and I have destroyed all your enemies before you.

And I will make you famous like the great ones of the earth.

I will fix a place for my people Israel;

I will plant them so that they may dwell in their place
without further disturbance.

Neither shall the wicked continue to afflict them as they did of old,
since the time I first appointed judges over my people Israel.

I will give you rest from all your enemies.

The LORD also reveals to you
that he will establish a house for you.

And when your time comes and you rest with your ancestors,
I will raise up your heir after you, sprung from your loins,
and I will make his kingdom firm.

I will be a father to him,

and he shall be a son to me.

Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before me;
your throne shall stand firm forever.”

Responsorial Psalm PS 89:2-3, 4-5, 27, 29

R. (2a) **For ever I will sing the goodness of the Lord.**

The promises of the LORD I will sing forever;
through all generations my mouth shall proclaim your faithfulness.
For you have said, “My kindness is established forever”;
in heaven you have confirmed your faithfulness.

R. **For ever I will sing the goodness of the Lord.**

“I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
I have sworn to David my servant:
Forever will I confirm your posterity
and establish your throne for all generations.”

R. **For ever I will sing the goodness of the Lord.**

“He shall say of me, ‘You are my father,
my God, the Rock, my savior.’
Forever I will maintain my kindness toward him,
and my covenant with him stands firm.”

R. **For ever I will sing the goodness of the Lord.**

Reading 2 ROM 16:25-27

Brothers and sisters:

To him who can strengthen you,
according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ,
according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret for long ages
but now manifested through the prophetic writings and,
according to the command of the eternal God,
made known to all nations to bring about the obedience of faith,
to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ
be glory forever and ever.

Amen.

Alleluia LK 1:38

R. **Alleluia, alleluia.**

Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.
May it be done to me according to your word.

R. **Alleluia, alleluia.**

Gospel LK 1:26-38

The angel Gabriel was sent from God
to a town of Galilee called Nazareth,
to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph,
of the house of David,

and the virgin's name was Mary.
And coming to her, he said,
"Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you."
But she was greatly troubled at what was said
and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.
Then the angel said to her,
"Do not be afraid, Mary,
for you have found favor with God.
"Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son,
and you shall name him Jesus.
He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High,
and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father,
and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever,
and of his kingdom there will be no end."
But Mary said to the angel,
"How can this be,
since I have no relations with a man?"
And the angel said to her in reply,
"The Holy Spirit will come upon you,
and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.
Therefore the child to be born
will be called holy, the Son of God.
And behold, Elizabeth, your relative,
has also conceived a son in her old age,
and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren;
for nothing will be impossible for God."
Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.
May it be done to me according to your word."
Then the angel departed from her.

PART TWO: A HOMILY ON THE READINGS

Metaphors are living things.

New metaphors, when they are young and fresh, can enchant us. They open doors of insight into the world that would otherwise be closed to us. They shine a light on what we are trying to see. They go out and fetch the truth for us and bring it back like a good hunting dog. These metaphors grab us by the lapels and won't let go.

Eventually, however, new metaphors get old and no longer have power to command our imagination. For example, we don't even think of the "leg" of a table as a metaphor any longer. On the other hand, a friend of mine once spoke about his depression as a "wilderness." This metaphor makes the truth of what many of us are struggling with these days vivid and real. It fetches.

All this applies to our metaphors about the mystery of God. The way we talk about God is metaphoric through and through. Many of these metaphors are tired and shop-worn. For example, we speak of God as “Lord” or “Father” and fail to feel any longer the shock that these metaphors brought with them in centuries past when they were brand new. Like “the leg of a table,” these words have meaning, but for many people today, they are a dog that just won’t hunt.

I also think that people of faith have a responsibility to seek out new metaphors for imagining God. When you find a new metaphor (or, should I say, when a new metaphor finds you), I advise you to surrender to it. At least give it a chance to take you out of yourself and into the Mystery of God. You might be surprised. This can be unnerving at times or even scary. However, if we want to open our souls to the transcendent, we will do well to have many metaphors working on the imagination.

So today, as we make our way through Advent toward Christmas, I want to give you a metaphor for God that took me by surprise and scares me a little, but, all the same, hunts like my grandfather’s old Retriever.

Nikos Kazantzakis was a Greek novelist and poet. He wrote *Zorba the Greek*. In one of his books, he describes a dream that is memorable. I told this dream to one of my students one day as we sat together in my office. My student is articulate and smart. But more to the point, in the course of our conversation about Kazantzakis’s dream, I came to appreciate that she has a soul as deep as the Marianas Trench.

But first, let me tell you about the dream.

In Kazantzakis’s dream, the dreamer is being pursued on a dark plain. Occasionally, the dreamer looks back anxiously over his shoulder, but sees nothing. Suddenly, from out of a great height, an eagle swoops down and sinks its talons into the dreamer’s skull. With a powerful pull from its wings, the eagle soars into the dark sky with its prey.

The dreamer grabs the legs of the eagle in a frantic struggle to free his head from the clutch of its talons. As he struggles, the eagle soars higher and higher into the air. And as the earth falls precipitously away beneath him, the dreamer realizes that, even if he should succeed in freeing himself from the eagle’s talons, he dare not let go of the eagle’s legs lest he fall back onto the darkened plain.

I remember how the face of my student lit up when I told her about Kazantzakis’s dream. She said to me repeatedly,

Yes, yes, that’s it, that’s it!. This is what God is like!

I was shocked. I had always been intrigued by Kazantzakis's dream, but never thought of it as a metaphor for our relationship with God. I needed to think this out. What could this mean? How is God like an eagle?

But my student gave me no time to think. She was doing my thinking for me. After saying this, she told me of an ordeal she had survived. I will not share with you the details. Just let me say that I hold my student in the greatest reverence for the depth of her faith in light of the trauma she suffered.

Last week, to honor Our Lady of Guadalupe, I spoke of Guadalupe as the "maternal face" of the love of God for us all. Guadalupe is a metaphor for God that reveals a truth about the maternal tenderness of God that other metaphors can't match. This week, I am inviting you to join with my student in imagining the Mystery of God as an eagle that has pursued us on a dark plain and then swept us up into the heavens to a dizzying height – so high that, even as we struggle to free ourselves from the eagle's talons, we dare not let go of it lest we fall back to earth.

I have come to like both of these metaphors for God. Guadalupe and Kazantzakis's eagle are obviously quite different. But they both fetch. Both metaphors go out and grab a hold of a small part of the Mystery of God and bring it back. Don't worry if the metaphors seem contradictory and mutually exclusive. The Mystery of God holds the reconciliation of all the contradictions that baffle us.

God is a soaring eagle who has lifted us up into the heavens. God is the eagle whose legs we dare not let go lest we fall back on to the ground. I thought of my student and her insight into Kazantzakis's dream when I read the story of the Annunciation in Luke's Gospel.

The story is familiar.

The angel Gabriel was sent from God
to a town of Galilee called Nazareth,
to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph,
of the house of David,
and the virgin's name was Mary.

And Mary was suddenly caught up in a Mystery that towered above her imagination. The Archangel swooped down out of heaven, like Kazantzakis's eagle, and her entire life was carried off into the depths of God.

The encounter with the divine filled Mary with fear.

But she was greatly troubled at what was said
and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

So, the Archangel reassures her.

“Do not be afraid, Mary,
for you have found favor with God.
Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son,
and you shall name him Jesus.
He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High.”

Mary, the young woman betrothed to be married to Joseph, was being invited to enter into the *tremendum* – the Mystery of the Living God that utterly transcends our ability to understand.

All of us are cast into the *tremendum* at one time or another. Here, again, I think of my student. Like the Blessed Virgin, my student has a story to tell about the *tremendum*. This is why her eyes lit up when I told her about Kazantzakis’s dream.

But I need to be clear. The *tremendum* is NOT the trauma my student suffered. The *tremendum* is the Mystery of God that came over her after the trauma – the Mystery that carried her into the heavens far above the darkened plain where she had been harmed.

I hold the Blessed Virgin in reverence. As she stood before Gabriel, *she was afraid of the tremendum*. I hold my student in reverence as well for the same reason. My reverence for the Mother of the Christ Child allows me to see the holiness of my student.

Do you see the point? The Blessed Virgin is a metaphor for every human being that has ever been taken up into the *tremendum* of God’s overpowering love. If you can understand the Blessed Virgin as a metaphor, you will begin to hold my student in reverence as well.

My student is a remarkable woman. She is holy and precious in the eyes of God. I remember thinking, as she left my office that day, how blessed I am to have students like her to learn from. She has a bright future. She is smart and energetic. Without doubt, she has tremendous personal depth and this will serve her well in the future.

But most of all, she is a woman of faith. God has seized her in the midst of her trauma and she will not let go of God. She understands the meaning of Kazantzakis’s dream. As the story of the Annunciation makes clear, the salvation of the world is to be found in women such as her.

My student has looked past her trauma. She has looked into the face of God and said,

“May it be done to me according to your word.”

PART THREE: INSTRUCTIONS FOR *LECTIO DIVINA*

I suggest that you use the readings and my reflections as an opportunity for practicing *lectio divina* (“divine reading”). This is an ancient spiritual practice that started with the great monks in the Syrian and Egyptian desert back in the early days of the Church. It is really quite simple.

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Step one: calm your mind (my Buddhist friends describe the mind as “a mango-tree full of chattering monkeys”). I find that paying attention to your breath for a few minutes is a practical and effective way to do this.

Step two: read the readings slowly and attentively. Savor the words as if you were tasting a great Pinot Noir. Don’t rush. You are not looking for information or instructions. You are making friends with a sacred text which will bless you abundantly if you will only open your heart to it and let it speak to you. In *lectio divina*, we are not actually “reading” the Bible. Rather, we are “listening” to the Bible as the sacred words speak to us.

Step three: repeat step two.

Step four: read the reflection on the readings.

Step five: Ask yourself a few questions:

- What particular words in the readings call out to me most forcefully?
- What is going on in my life such that these words call to me so forthrightly?
- How am I being asked to change, both interiorly and exteriorly?
- In light of this *lectio divina*, how am I being invited to be of service to the world today?