

First Sunday of Advent - B
Isaiah 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7;
I Corinthians 1:3-9;
Mark 13:33-37
Little Flower - 11/29/20

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today we celebrate the First Sunday of Advent, the beginning of a new Church year.

For most of us, this has been a year unlike any previous year. This is also true in terms of the Church year. Beginning March 17, churches were closed until late May.

During the closure, priests were only able to celebrate private Masses. Our sacristan Mike Kanney served Mass every day. After a few weeks, we started live streaming some Masses thanks to Angie Mackell. When we started live streaming Sunday Masses, I asked Katie Leszczynski, a former TV sports anchor, to become our lector until we reopened. Finally, we were able to reopen in early June at 50% capacity with social distancing, and masks. Our attendance was slowly growing until the most recent spike in cases. Interestingly, the first week back, I noted that three 93-year-old parishioners were in attendance, and they continue to come.

What did this mean? For most of Lent, we were not able to attend Mass or Way of the Cross in person. Likewise, we were not able to gather in person to celebrate Palm Sunday, Holy Thursday, Good Friday, the Easter Vigil, Easter Sunday, Ascension, or Pentecost. Our RCIA candidates were not able to receive the Sacraments of Initiation until late summer. Likewise, First Confessions and First Communion were postponed from April to late summer. Instead of one First Communion, we had several smaller First Communions. Many couples changed the dates of their weddings or held weddings with only family present. When we could not schedule funeral Masses, many families buried loved ones and scheduled memorial Masses later.

If we ever thought that we are in charge of our lives, the pandemic certainly challenged that notion. There has been so much physical, emotional, spiritual, and financial suffering.

During Advent, we prepare to celebrate the three comings of Christ: his historical coming two thousand years ago, his coming into our lives and hearts today, and his final coming in glory. However, if there is one theme that runs through Advent, it is the theme of hope. In light of the pandemic, I would suggest that this Advent we all focus on hope.

Hope has two dimensions. Hope and faith overlap. As with faith, Christian hope includes entrusting ourselves and our futures to God and to God's Word of promise, Jesus Christ. The second dimension of hope is confident awaiting the fulfillment of God's promises. In today's reading from his First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul proclaims that God is faithful. God is faithful to his promises.

In the midst of the coronavirus, we need to trust God's promise to always be with us. Before his Ascension, Jesus promised his disciples, "*And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age*" [Mt. 28:20]. I would remind you also of Archbishop Daniel's answer to a question on the radio after 9/11. The man asked where God was when the planes hit the Twin Towers. He said God was there just as he was there when Jesus was crucified. We have to believe that God is present, Jesus is present, during this pandemic.

The other important promise is found in St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, "*We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose*" [Rom. 8:28]. If we have the virtue of hope, we are confident that tomorrow can and will be better than today.

My brothers and sisters, in today's Gospel Jesus calls us to be watchful and alert. I suggest that we want to be watchful and alert for all the signs of God presence within and among us during this time. I suggest we want to watchful and alert for all the good God is calling forth in us and others during this time. With the prophet Isaiah, let us pray, "*Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, with the mountains quaking before you, while you wrought awesome deeds we could not hope for... No ear has ever heard, no eye ever seen, any God but you doing such deeds for those who wait for him.*"