

December 19, 2021
4th Sunday of Advent
Micah 5:1-4a
Hebrews 10:5-10
Luke 1:39-45

'Twas the night before Christmas.

Not quite yet, you say?

Well, it's the 4th Sunday of Advent. We're on the cusp of Christmas. We've been preparing for weeks now: Shopping, decorating, tree-trimming, baking, Christmas parties, Christmas cards, package deliveries, etc., etc., etc.

But are we really prepared for Christmas; for Emmanuel; for God made man; for God among us; for the Wonderful Counselor; for Mighty God; for the Everlasting Father; for the Prince of Peace? Or have we been too busy preparing to prepare?

Well, it's not too late. Fourth Sunday of Advent. Still time. Still time to quiet ourselves, like the down of a thistle or like the moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow.

The stockings were hung by the chimney with care. What are you dreaming about for your stockings? Are visions of sugar plums dancing in your heads? Or diamonds? Or gold jewelry? Or maybe something bigger that won't fit in a stocking?

At the risk of sounding greedy, if those sugar plums and gems and jewels are the sum and substance of our dreams, then I think we're not

dreaming big enough. In fact, I'd like to suggest hanging 4 stockings, not just one. Let's go for the whole sleigh full of toys!

Hang one stocking for the gift of hope. Not just the wishful thinking kind of hope, but true Christian hope. Christian hope is our confident expectation that God's purposes for us will be fulfilled because He promised it. The Incarnation that we are about to celebrate transforms wishful thinking into confident expectation—the expectation of eternal life with the Lord.

Hang another stocking for the gift of love—true love, not the romance of the season kind of love. True love is embodied in today's gospel. True love is a pregnant teenager travelling on her own through a pretty rough neighborhood to help an elderly relative through a difficult pregnancy. True love is providing a loving environment in which to shelter an unmarried pregnant teenager—an environment that dispels fear and celebrates

the blessed life to come. True love is thanking the Lord for the gift of life and celebrating life with Him no matter the circumstances of life that surround us.

Hang a third stocking for the gift of joy. Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa says that our greatest joy is when we seek to do good for others. Joyful people are humble. Joyful people laugh a lot and have a good sense of humor. Joyful people accept what comes. They take the good with the bad. Joyful people are forgiving. They have short memories and don't dwell on the past. Joyful people are grateful for the gift of life no matter the circumstances of that life. Joyful people are compassionate. Joyful people are generous with their time, talent, and treasure. Unlike happiness, which is largely dependent upon external circumstances, joy comes from within. We discover joy. It doesn't happen to us. It is a gift from God that is a state of mind and heart. Joy allows us to face suffering in a way that ennobles rather than

embitters. It allows us to face hardship without becoming hard. It allows us to suffer heartbreak without becoming heart broken.

Finally, hang a stocking for the gift of peace. And I don't mean world peace. As nice as that would be, it hasn't happened in human history and it's certainly not on the horizon. The peace we seek is far more than the absence of war. We seek the peace of Christ, which Christ Himself describes as peace "not as the world gives". The peace we seek is "shalom", the Old Testament word that ultimately means completeness or wholeness. We seek "Eirene", the New Testament Greek word that means interior harmony. We seek an inner calm of mind and heart no matter what is raging in the world around us. Perhaps St Thomas Becket said it best in a homily delivered shortly before his murder: The peace of Christ is a "deep, inner assurance that all things, even our greatest suffering, will be for our (own) good". The peace of Christ is the gift that enables us to recognize God's presence in our lives and to recognize Him at work in our lives.

So, hang your four stockings by the chimney with care, and I guarantee they will be filled with hope, love, joy, and peace. How can I make such a guarantee? Simple. Our great God already gave us these gifts when He became one of us. They lie within us. It's up to us, with the help of God, to discover them.

May the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, help us all to discover God's hope, love, joy, and peace this Christmas.