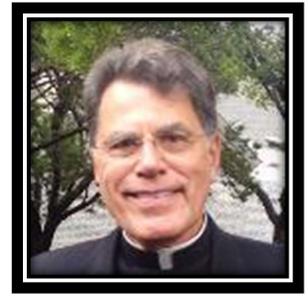


# Fr. Samuel's Homily

Epiphany Sunday, January 7, 2018



In my Advent homilies I endeavored to draw your attention to the biblical meaning of some simple words. The first of those was comfort, from the passage in Isaiah when the Lord says, “Comfort, comfort my people.” I told you that comfort is a word formed from two Latin words that mean “with strength.” Thus what the Lord is saying in that passage is that he was inviting his people to share in his strength in the context of their lives in this world. God’s promise was that he would be with them and that he would give them what they needed even in the most difficult circumstances of their lives. In the face of everything God would sustain them. The second word was “joy.” That came also from Isaiah, when the prophet stated, “I rejoice heartily in the Lord.” It came as well from Mary’s Magnificat when she stated, “My heart rejoices in God my savior.” Both the prophet and Mary were not referring so some sort of giddy happiness but to a deep, heart-felt understanding that God was with them and would always be with them. You and I are invited to share in that same comfort and that same joy. Today I want to draw your attention to another word—a word not stated but most certainly implied in the readings for this day. That word is “hope.”

The Epiphany story centers on the most ancient and enduring hopes of humankind—the hope for God’s comfort and joy in our lives. It is a story about the reality of the world but at the same time what is possible if only we focus on the best that is in us. As a story it is most striking in the sense that it is an account of innocence in the midst of evil. It is precisely that innocence, I think that makes it so attractive to us. I think that as we come to this time of year we respond to it precisely because it touches something in us and that something is our deepest hope—the most central of our dreams. A guiltless child has been born. Angels, in their rapture, paint the sky with song. Shepherds hear and come. A star leads the magi out of distant lands to see. It is a beautiful, humble scene that simply and most profoundly touches our hearts.

However not everyone greets the coming of this child favorably. In Herod we see another reaction. In him what is touched is a dark place within him, a place of jealousy and even fear. In the scene in which the magi come before Herod, we encounter darkness. When Herod hears of a newborn king of the Jews, he is deeply troubled. He feels threatened. His power may be at risk. So what does he do? He does what most of us do when we feel threatened. He sought information. He went to the chief priests and the scribes and asked them what prophesy said about the coming of a Messiah. “Where was he to be born?” “In Bethlehem of Judea,” they respond. And Herod is afraid.

So he goes back to the magi with a plot. Through deceit he will protect his power from this threat. He asks them to bring him information about the child so that he too might go and pay

homage. However, later warned by an angel, after encountering the Christ child, the magi avoid Herod by going home another way.

What can we learn from this story? For it is, after all, a story about the ways of the world. Thus, it is a story about how we often respond to things in our lives. For we do live a world such as that described in the first reading in which “darkness covers the earth and thick clouds cover the people.” In such a world is not Herod’s way perhaps the best? Is it not best just to lie, cheat, look out for oneself above all else, destroy that which we perceive as threat? Herod thought so. Many continue to think so today.

For is not the world a difficult place? Is not the world and even the Church, sometimes, steeped in self-interest? We often see, on many levels people, betrayed by those who are supposed to protect them. Do we not often see indifference and even antipathy toward those who are weak? Do we not sometimes wonder if the best we can do in this world is just to survive the best way we can? What makes us so sure that when it comes down to it we would not follow Herod’s example if the opportunity presented itself? Where can we find hope in something better so that we can resist the temptations of Herod?

We can find it in the first reading. Yes there is darkness in the world but the prophet tells us that a light shines in the darkness. We find it in the gospel. For if we look at the light, not just on this Epiphany day but on all the days of the year—if we look at the child in that manger, we might take on some of the light that we find there. The light of Christ is there. It is here in this world. God invites not to be taken in by the darkness, especially the darkness that disguises itself as light, but to place our faith and trust in the light of Christ. And there we find true hope. Our lives will settle down. Our goals will become simple. By placing ourselves in the hands of love, Christ’s light will stay alight within us, sheltered like a candle in the wind. That light will enable us to see beyond the darkness of this world. It will enable us to see one another as God sees all of us—as full of marvelous possibility and worthy of love. It will enable us to see ourselves as beloved of God. It will illumine the paths to which God calls us in this life.

All that the light asks of us is to place our faith and trust in innocence in the midst of evil. All that we are asked is to embrace in our hearts the light of Epiphany—the story of God’s invitation to us to the experience of the light that drives back all darkness and leads us to the fulfillment of our deepest hope.