

“Obedience of Faith”

4th Sunday of Advent [A]

Is 7:10-14; Ps 24:1-6; Rom 1:1-7; Mt 1:23; Mt 1:18-24

A few weeks ago while away on business travel,

- I was online and began watching a segment of a professional debate
 - between an atheist and a Christian.
- It took place at a prominent American university
 - and the subject of the debate
 - was over the existence of God,
 - particularly the Christian’s belief
 - in an all-powerful, all-loving God.

In the short segment I watched, it was the atheist’s turn at the podium.

- He was a polished speaker and posed this question:
- How can someone say there is a God – much less an all-loving God --
 - when there is such profound evil in the world?
 - 9 million children die each year
 - before reaching the age of 5.
 - Think of their grieving parents
 - many pleading to God for their children’s lives
 - and yet, their children go on to die...
 - He concluded by confidently declaring:
 - Any God who would allow innocent children
 - to suffer and die by the millions
 - and ignore the fervent pleas of their parents,
 - either can do nothing to help them
 - or He doesn’t care to do so.
 - Therefore, the Christian God is either impotent or evil.

As he then shifted to his next attack, I thought to myself:

How sad... that a man

- so obviously intellectually gifted
- so well-spoken and so passionate in his cause

- could nonetheless be so profoundly wrong.

“How can there be a loving God when there’s so much pain & suffering in the world?”

- It is truly an age-old question, because suffering is an age-old problem.
- And I don’t mean to oversimplify,
 - but to conclude that evil in the world
 - is proof there is no God
 - or that He must be impotent or uncaring
 - is a lot like me saying that
 - since house fires kill thousands each year in the U.S. alone
 - there must not be any firemen
 - (or perhaps they’re just incompetent or uncaring)

It’s not a perfect analogy,

- but it does help us grasp:
 - that our atheist friend makes a rather weak argument.
 - The presence of evil does not negate the presence of God.
 - Nor does it make Him in any way culpable or unloving.
 - When you see a stray dog
 - do you automatically assume it has no owner
 - or that the owner obviously doesn’t care for the dog?
 - It could very well be that the dog
 - simply wandered too far from home and got lost...
 - The cause of pain & strife in the world is – in a word
 - Sin – our bad choices: choosing our will over God’s will.
 - From Adam & Eve to us today, we are all complicit
 - weaving suffering into the very fabric of
 - our human existence.
 - But that’s not on God – it’s only on us and our own free will choices.
 - And it’s precisely *because* there’s sin in the world
 - with all its suffering and death
 - that God came to earth in effort to save us.

John 3:16 – that verse you often see held up in the end zone of football games:

- “For God SO loved the world
 - that He gave his only son
 - that whoever believes in Him
 - might not perish, but have everlasting life.”

Just as the brave firefighter is not the *cause* for the fire

- but the *answer* to it,
- charging onto the scene to extinguish the fire and rescue the people,
- So did Jesus Christ charge into our world
 - a world ravaged by the fires of sin
 - sacrificing himself at the very hands of those he sought to save
 - in order to defeat Satan and rescue us.

This is Amazing Grace. This is radical love.

Thus our eternal gratitude. And thus our celebration of Christmas Day, now just one week away:

- honoring the day the Creator of the universe
 - out of profound love and humility
 - stooped down to enter humanity
 - in the person of Jesus Christ.

I say these things, and yet,

I am certain my arguments would not sway our atheist friend.

- For our Christian beliefs are not based solely on *intellect*
 - (though there is great intellectual heft to support them)
- but our beliefs are also necessarily based on faith.

When we speak of belief in God.

When we speak of Jesus Christ, God in the flesh.

His glorious Passion, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension

- at some point, *faith* must enter the discussion,
- recognizing that belief only in what can be
 - *intellectually* proven or successfully argued in a debate
 - is not true faith in God.

- Rather, it's merely faith in what mankind can reason...
- (and that's a big difference)

OBEDIENCE OF FAITH

Today, in our second reading

- Paul is penning the opening few lines of his letter to the Romans.
- In his greeting he mentions "obedience of faith."
 - Speaking of Jesus, Paul wrote
 - *"Through him we have received the grace of apostleship,*
 - *to bring about the obedience of faith,*
 - *for the sake of his name..."* (Rom 1:5)
 - He again references "obedience of faith" 15 chapters later
 - in the closing sentences of Romans (Rom 16:26)
 - bookends of the whole letter

So what does Paul mean by this "obedience of faith"?

- He simply means that obedience of God
 - is the end result of having true faith in Him.
- Jesus taught, *"By their fruits shall ye know them."* (Mt 7:20)
 - If I'm wondering what kind of tree I'm looking at
 - and I notice that it's producing apples,
 - I immediately realize I'm looking at an apple tree...
 - So it is with the Christian life:
 - If I profess to be man of faith
 - And you don't see the fruit of obedience to God in my life,
 - you'd have good cause to question my faith
 - because obedience of God is unquestionably
 - one of the fruits of faith.

Our Scripture readings today give us several examples of "obedience of faith."

- In our first reading, the prophet Isaiah says:
 - *"... the Lord himself will give you this sign:*
 - *the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son,*

- *and shall name him Emmanuel.” (Is 7:14)*
 - Isaiah’s prophecy that *“the virgin shall conceive”*
 - to the ears of the secular world
 - must’ve sounded outlandish
 - Really? The virgin shall conceive..??
 - For that matter, I imagine such talk
 - would’ve raised eyebrows in the synagogue as well!
 - Isaiah’s been hanging out in the desert too long...
 - Somebody get that man some water!
 - Isaiah surely knows a virgin birth sounds irrational
 - but his role as prophet
 - was not to weigh the message he hears from God
 - on the scales of human reason.
 - His role as prophet was simply to speak the Word of God as it was revealed to him.
 - And so he did, and that *obedience* speaks to his *faith*.
- The Jewish people
 - were called to their own obedience of faith.
 - *Believing* in Isaiah’s prophecy
 - that their Messiah would be somehow born of a virgin...
 - Continuing to believe despite it not coming to pass in a lifetime
 - or even in their children’s children’s lifetimes...
 - For it would be no less than 700 years
 - before Isaiah’s prophecy would be fulfilled.
 - Those who continued to look forward to this miraculous virgin birth
 - truly had tremendous faith – revealed in their *obedience* to keep watching for that sign of Christ’s birth.
- Our Blessed Mother, Mary
 - exhibited enormous obedience of faith.
 - Without understanding how she could possibly be pregnant
 - perhaps wondering how she could ever explain this
 - to her fiancé Joseph
 - (not to mention religious authorities... knowing the penalty of adultery was death)
 - Mary must’ve been bewildered, and yet her response?
 - *“Be it done unto me according to thy word...” (Lk 1:38)*
 - Classic obedience of faith

- faith demonstrated by her obedience to God's will.
- And of course Joseph, of whom so little is written in Scripture.
 - He also demonstrated great faith thru obedience.
 - Scripture doesn't tell us whether Joseph was
 - emotionally wounded or confused or in disbelief
 - by Mary's announcement of her virgin pregnancy.
 - Or perhaps he believed her 100%
 - and simply felt unworthy to be involved in God's work,
 - not seeing his role in it.
 - Regardless, Mary's announcement
 - must've been *stunning* news to Joseph
 - and we are told in Scripture that he
 - intended to quietly break off their engagement (Mt 1:19)
 - And yet, when an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream
 - encouraging him to take Mary as his wife
 - Matthew tells us, "*he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him...*" (Mt 1:24)
 - What a powerful example of faith –
 - again demonstrated by obedience to God.

Note that in each of these examples

- Scripture does not say the involved parties ever completely understood
 - all the How's and Why's and When's...
 - They did not process God's callings
 - thru the filter of "what makes sense to me"
- They all stepped forward in obedience,
 - not because they had all the details figured out
 - but because of their faith in God.

APPLICATION

Today, we too are challenged to this same "obedience of faith."

- And that might sound easy enough on the surface:
 - "Of course I have faith in God
 - and of course I'll obey Him"
- But we often find obedience to be harder in practice... Why is that?
 - Because we SO struggle with pride:

- We often act like we know better than God:
 - I think I understand my life better than God.
 - I think I understand my “current situation” better than God.
- And often we want God’s calling to make sense to US before we obey..
 - God, you know I love you and have faith in you
 - And believe me, I’m ready to obey you... BUT...
 - Could we just review this one more time?
 - I hear you calling, I hear your command
 - but if you could just clue me in a wee bit more on
 - some of the how’s and why’s and what for’s
 - then I’ll be happy to jump right in...
 - All of this inevitably pointing to: our lack of faith...
- Other times we negotiate with God.
 - Father, I hear you calling me to travel due North...
 - But would you settle for Northeast..??
 - I’m just not seeing this whole North thing...
 - but can definitely give you NE all day long...
 - Father, I hear you calling me to work your fields
 - to help harvest your crop
 - But would you settle for a generous donation
 - to help run the farm instead...??
 - But trust me Father, I’m here to support...
- When you’re called to go North, you can argue
 - going NE is better than South
- If you’re called to the harvest, you can argue
 - a donation to the cause is better than nothing at all
- But was that what God asked of you?
 - Lack of *true* obedience = a lack of *true* faith.

So the question of the day is this:

- When we examine our daily lives
 - what evidence do we see of Obedience of Faith?
- Oh we know the textbook answer:
 - Yes, of course I have faith in God and obey Him
- We know it in our heads

- but do we feel it in our hearts?
- And is it demonstrated in our lives...?
 - Faith in the Wisdom of God
 - beyond human understanding
 - Faith that He has a divine plan for your life
 - a reason for which you were created
 - a mission for you to accomplish
 - an eternal dwelling place for you
 - a deep inner peace He wants to give you
 - peace that only comes when we're in communion with Him.

SUMMARY

In this Advent season,

- Perhaps you or your family
 - have been away from church for a while.
 - If that's you: Welcome home, we hope you'll stay
 - And truly, God asks you to stay
- Or maybe you're searching for a church home
 - If so, we would love to have you join us here at JDW
- If you're a faithful parishioner:
 - thank you for all you do
 - keep on keepin' on

But regardless of where we all are on our spiritual journeys

As we count down the final days to Christmas

- may our hearts be increasingly filled with joy and thanksgiving
 - as we ponder its true meaning:
 - The birth of our Saviour Jesus Christ

And may our lives increasingly accept the challenge of today's Scriptures:

- the Obedience of faith

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