

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion- to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed. I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

Luke 1:46-55 And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Sermon: What we know of the light, we learn in the dark.

I'm beginning to wonder about our dog Sophie. We've had her since Christmas 2004 - a proud purchase at the Danbury Fair Mall. I know that breaks all the rules - don't buy a dog at Christmas and don't buy a dog at a mall - but we couldn't resist. And she came with her own set of papers, daughter of Pinkie Eye and Flashy Bunny. She has been a good dog and a big comfort when our youngest daughter left for college and we needed a little company.

She's wonderful company, but I've noticed something strange lately. She is often listless during the day, when the nighttime comes she perks right up and is raring' to go. It's almost like she has a bit of the nocturnal blood line mixed in, although that wasn't in her papers. And then, just last week, I came home and found her lying on the couch listening to my stereo. It's not that unusual to find her lying on the couch, it's a little more unusual to find her listening to the stereo, but what was really troublesome was that she was listening to Willie Nelson singing "The night life ain't no good life, but it's my life." I think my dog is becoming a creature of the night!

Of course, this time of year, we're all becoming creatures of the night - you get up, it's dark; you drive home from work - it's dark. Your mind tells you it's midnight but the clock is just striking 9 - it's the dark days before the winter solstice, and something deep inside of us is just waiting for the tide to turn and the hours of sunlight to lengthen and put the darkness in it's place - at nighttime! All of us can sing with Sophie and Willie - The night life ain't no good life but it's my life.

I read an interesting newspaper column this past week by the writer James Carroll. Carroll is a former Catholic priest who was once chaplain at Boston University. He still lives in Boston, is married, and is a frequent contributor to the Boston Globe, where this column appeared - in fact, I took one of his

lines as the title of this morning's sermon: . What we know of the light, we learn in the dark.

I have to admit, I couldn't quite understand everything he was trying to say, but I find that is frequently the case when I read Catholic writers. But I did understand and agree with a two of his points, points he made about waiting and dissatisfaction.

About waiting he wrote:

For the next two weeks, the days shorten, the nights grow longer, and the eyes of all people lift to see what's coming. Now is when theaters should mount "Waiting for Godot," or "Waiting for Lefty," bringing alive the national melodrama, which could be called, "Waiting for Barack." Of course, what the nation overwhelmingly awaits is the economy's recovery, a hope that has been magically tied to the coming inauguration.

On the Christian calendar, this is the time of Advent, which means coming. Before God's presence can be felt, God's absence must be reckoned with, and absence is the first present of December. "Oh come, oh come, Emmanuel," Christians sing, picking up on Isaiah's prophecy, but primordial longing for what does not yet exist is the point.

This longing for what does not yet exist brought him to the topic of dissatisfaction, and he begins his discussion of dissatisfaction in the same location where we found our Sophie - the shopping center, or as we now call it, The Mall.

He asks:

What does the season's shopping frenzy reveal, even in an economy when shopping makes little sense?

And in good priestly fashion he gives us a theological answer:

Humans are conceived with a constitutional inability to be satisfied with the present moment ("conceived," as the tradition says, "in original sin"). That in-built dissatisfaction is so efficiently appealed to by ideas of acquisition and consumption that an entire financial system has been constructed around it. The darkest days of the year, when the unconscious is most at the mercy of longing, inevitably trigger the commercial mechanism of desire. Shoppers are after not what they buy, but the pure effervescence of buying. That lightheadedness substitutes for light, but it is fleeting. Is it possible that the present economic crisis is a final reckoning with the lie that happiness can be purchased?

Well, I won't get into any conversation about buying things we don't need - that cuts a little close to the bone for me - but I am interested that he tries to make a connection between dissatisfaction and original sin. Because I would say that while dissatisfaction may lead to many troubles, it seems also to be the source of many advances. If Thomas Alva Edison were not dissatisfied with reading by gas lamp, would we all still be hanging candles off our Christmas trees? If Chubby Checker was never dissatisfied with dancing the lindy-hop, would we ever have had the twist? If Bill Gates had been content to simply wait in line for the mainframe at Harvard, would we ever have had the PC and on-line shopping? And if Hugh Hefner had been.... well you get the point.

To some extent Carroll admits to this in his column. He talks about the creativity that flows from dissatisfaction:

The double-mindedness that insists in the time of long nights that long days are surely coming back is itself the antidote. Humans cannot have the experience that something is missing without supplying it through an unwilling act of imagination. That is why, finally, longing and desire weigh so much more than nostalgia and regret. To want, in the true economy, is already to have. What we know of the light, we learn in the dark.

I think, after reading that a half dozen times, I kind of get it - perhaps without even knowing the reason, we experience dissatisfaction; this dissatisfaction causes us to imagine something different - it might be quite vague at first, but in time this longing, this desire, takes shape and form in our mind - an unwilling act of imagination he called it - so, he can conclude, what we know of the light we learn in the dark.

Well, maybe that leaves conclusion you in the dark, but let's think about it in terms of the two characters of Scripture we read about this morning - first in the prophecy of Isaiah and then in the Gospel of Luke. In both situations we encounter people who are waiting, people who are dissatisfied, and people whose imaginations turn to the same topic.

The selection from Isaiah was ancient at the time of Christ - it was scripture then, and Jesus read it when he went to the synagogue. In fact, when he was done reading it he announced: Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

But imagine it not when Jesus read it but when Isaiah wrote it. Isaiah speaking to a people who were waiting - waiting to go home. They were a displaced people - not just refugees, but captives, forcibly removed from their homeland and marched to a foreign land. Here they composed laments for the land they left behind:

By the rivers of Babylon- there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.

These are the people the prophet speaks of when he says: The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness- on them light has shined.

So they are waiting, they are dissatisfied, and what is it they imagine?
good news to the oppressed,
binding up the brokenhearted,
liberty to the captives,
release to the prisoners;
a proclamation that this is the year of the LORD's favor,

What they imagine, in short, is justice.

And so it is also with Mary. She is pregnant with her first child. Her imagination is flooded with a vision of the life that does not yet exist. And in that life she sees the light of God breaking forth, and the strong arm of the Lord acting for justice: he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. She speaks as if the vision is already accomplished.

Mary was right to see the light of God in the coming birth of her son; Jesus was right to lay claim to the prophecy of Isaiah. But why, oh why, did his path to heaven have to lead him to that day on Golgotha when he was crucified and when the dark shadow of injustice spread deep across the face of the earth? Those who give the easy answer to this question have not given it their full attention. It is a mystery that will not yield to our understanding when we are in the bright sunshine of long days in our lives - it only gives up a bit of it's power when the days are long and we become creatures of the night.

Surely our lives have their own seasons, days of long sun and days of long nights. If only those seasons were as regular and predicable as the turning of the earth in its journey around the sun. In every season and circumstance we turn to God, but to gain a fuller vision of the depth of God's love and the height of God's justice and breadth of God's mercy we too walk in darkness, we too must dwell in the land of deep darkness. For What we know of the light, we learn in the dark.