

God's Work in Us

- 1st Sunday of Advent
- December 4, 2018
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Happy New Year! Yes this First Sunday of Advent is the New Year's Day of our life of faith. Beginning today we engage in the cycle of our salvation in the round of the year in our liturgies: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Ordinary Time, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, and more Ordinary Time in the Holy Spirit till the culmination we celebrated last week of Christ the King. So welcome to the new year of faith on this hinge Sunday when we can look back over the past year at how we have lived our Christian faith or forward to the coming year to how we want to live our faith more fully.

The readings of today are great help because, as is fitting for a pivoting Sunday, they take the widest possible perspective. They begin with promise: "The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and Judah." They extend in the gospel reading all the way to the ultimate event: "Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory." So they reach from promise to power; from hope to happiness. Our journey of faith in the year behind or the year ahead encompasses this whole sweep of what we call salvation history. It is not, however, the history only of salvation of nations and peoples and faith communities and the church; it is also our own personal salvation history, our journey from promise to power, from hope to happiness.

We must believe that it is God's work, not our work; his work with our cooperation; what he is doing in and through us. I, for instance, need to believe that Seattle University is God's work even though it may not seem to be at times. There are the celebrations, the formation and growth of students, the gratitude of parents and the generosity of friends. There is the tossing of hats at commencement, the enrolling of the largest freshmen class ever, the opening of a new residence hall, the ceremonies with Native American peoples of Vi Hilbert, their hero who preserved their Lushootseed language, and for whom they are honored to have a new building named, and the opening of an Indigenous Peoples Institute. There is the recognition of the community of servant leaders surrounding Tricia and Steve Trainer at our Gala; record involvement of students in service in the neighborhood; a community of twenty-six Jesuits discerning how to minister as God wishes them to a new generation of students; the finding of an exceptional, promising, new provost, Shane Martin; exciting athletic teams; student scientists doing research; engineers solving problems for companies; nurses and educators practicing their skills among the most needy; law students acting for justice; ecclesial ministers dialoguing across interreligious boundaries; and so, so much more. We have to believe that this is the work of God; not our work; we have to pray for it and support it and minister to it and be thankful for it as God's work. God is working between promise and power; between hope and happiness.

The real work of God on which we should reflect on this New Year's Day of faith is far more likely a hidden work. It is a hidden activity in God's work in Seattle University, in the intimate lives of students and alumni, professors and coaches, priests and pastors in their goodness, in

their sufferings borne, in their love and patience, in their kindness and forgiveness, in their sorrows and griefs, in their encouragement, thankfulness and gratitude. God's work goes on above ground and, most importantly, below ground in the hearts of people of faith and in the searchings of people not yet of faith. How good it is to be part—as you are—of a Catholic and Jesuit university in which you can see so much of God's evident work and know of God's hidden work?

How about each of us here as we reflect and on his First Sunday of Advent? How does God say to us personally: “I will fulfill the promise I made to” you in your baptism and you “will see the Son of God coming” to you “with power and great glory”? Where is God's work in us? Where is it God's work and not ours but only our cooperation with God? You could identify for yourselves—as I just did for Seattle U. in the past year—the evident, above-ground, workings of God in your lives, perhaps in a birth, or a wedding, or a new love, or a special enjoyment of God's nature, or a tearful but consoling memorial of a beloved person, or a great joy, or new job, or the success of a child or grandchild: God's work in your life from promise to power, from hope to happiness.

God's work in you personally is more likely hidden as the real work of God in our university is hidden in the intimate lives of the people of our community. Could it be something like recognizing your white privilege and whom it hurts or oppresses; or learning your unconscious bias and lack of full and free acceptance of LGTBQ persons; or the discovery that you actually do not treat women as at least equals? (I came across a good quote about women the other day which made me laugh. It said, a wife is “braver than her husband, which should be unsurprising to anyone even abstractly aware that women have endured everything men have endured, while also enduring men”.) Or is God's work hidden in your patiently and lovingly caring for an elderly parent even as they lose their ability to communicate with you? Or is it in bearing a loss or a suffering with faith? Jesus does not promise to take away our suffering, but having himself drunk the cup of human suffering to the dregs, he promises to be with us in our suffering, so that when we drink the cup of suffering “our lips meet his over the brim”. Perhaps God's work in you is being with a person you just can't with all your efforts bring yourself to like, being with the person kindly, fully, graciously even if inside you are roiling. Maybe God's work in you concerns a son or daughter who no longer practices your faith, yet you continue to stand with them, believe in them, hope in them, pray for them, witness to them quietly from your own faith and practice. Maybe when for all of us the world seems overwhelming in cruelty, war, division, and hostilities, or in seemingly unsolvable problems like homelessness or poverty, yet God's work is shown in our doing some small thing well to respond to what is so massive and doing it trustingly. Also, for all of us, perhaps God's work in us in the scandal of the Catholic Church in its failure to protect children from sexual abuse is to take small, hope-filled actions to do what we can to change our church. In these and a thousand other ways it is God's work in us, not our work on our own.

On this First Sunday of Advent, this New Year's Day of our life of faith, perhaps as we look back over the past year in our university or in ourselves to look for how God has worked and as we look forward to the coming year to how we will live out our faith more fully, we should say that until he comes God consoles us in Jesus not “in a cloud with power and great glory”, but comes to us hidden in weakness and lack of glory, with gentleness and humility as did the Christ

child whose birth we look forward to. In coming to us in this humble way he is fulfilling what he has promised us as we live by faith in hope for happiness.