

## 1st Sunday of Advent

The headlights coming toward me on the highway did not seem right. I was driving to Conception Abbey late one night this week. North of St. Joseph, I exited I-29 onto 71, another four-lane divided highway. There wasn't much traffic. I was traveling in the far right lane northbound. Then I saw the headlights of an oncoming vehicle - not in the southbound lanes across the median, but heading south toward me in the lane on my immediate left - the wrong lane. I was doing 65, and I'm sure the headlights were coming toward me at 65. Within a few seconds, the car whizzed past me without incident. I just hoped and prayed that the driver would figure it out, get off the road, and turn around before causing a high speed head-on collision. I was in the correct lane, managing my speed, seatbelt fastened. But even if I follow every rule, there is no guarantee that I couldn't be killed.

At times we feel completely helpless, even when we are doing the right thing. I'm sure my parents felt helpless when they sent us off to school on our own, when we mixed with new friends they didn't know, or when they let us drive the car alone. They had done their best to teach us how to follow the rules, but even so, they could not anticipate all of the things that could go wrong, get us into trouble, or threaten our very lives. In spite of all our careful preparations, life has moments when we feel completely helpless. Someone has to save us.

The name "Jesus" means "Savior." The angel Gabriel wanted that name for the child so that all would know from the beginning of his life the mission of this new arrival. This child was born to save us from our sins, and not just from our own sins, but from the sins of everyone else that threaten our security, our occupation, our family and our lives. Jesus came to save us from sin and death - not to keep them from happening, but to save us when they do.

We anticipate this in the refrain of today's responsorial psalm: "Lord, make us turn to you, show us your face, and we shall be saved." All three phrases indicate our helplessness. We think we control our lives and our health, our family, our schoolwork and our job, but we don't. We discover every day how helpless we are. We sing about being "saved" because we cannot save ourselves; we ask God to "show" us his face because we cannot see it alone; we ask God to make us "turn" to look because we tend to look at other things: distractions, temptations, loneliness, and despair. Sometimes we are helpless not because of where other people are driving, but because of where we have placed our attention. It's not always others who are weak, but we ourselves.

Advent offers hope. It does not build us up, saying how gifted, clever or promising we are, but how needy, clueless and helpless we are - even when we follow every rule. If we have trouble seeing God, or discerning what God wants us to do, that is no cause for despair. It is the starting place for hope. We don't have to know all the reasons behind every event. Reasons don't matter. We have a savior, one who can save us when things go wrong, when we have sinned, when people we love disappoint us, and even when we face the loss of life. We have a savior who overcomes all of that. We spend much of life in the mysterious time between being helpless and being saved. That is Advent. Its message rings loud and clear: Do not despair. Be not be afraid. We have a savior, and he is coming.

Sunday, December 3, 2017