

Third Sunday of Advent

Anti-Muslim bigotry is unacceptable in our country. Terrorist attacks naturally increase anxiety. But some Americans believe that all Muslims are potentially dangerous. The belief that Muslims should be excluded from our country is un-American and un-Christian. Such opinions derive from ignorance and fear. They also come from a lack of faith in God who created the world and saw that it was good. We have a better nature inside us that can counter terrorism with charity. We can build peace.

St. Paul promises the Philippians that “the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” He argues very simply: “The Lord is near. Have no anxiety at all.” If you have faith, if you believe in God, and if you believe God is near, you have nothing to fear, no matter what terrors may surround you. Paul’s theme is very dear to the season of Advent. We spend these four weeks awaiting Christmas in the spirit of our ancestors who awaited the Messiah. We know that Christmas is near. We also believe that “the Lord is near.” That is the source of our peace.

Today’s second reading has also served as the entrance antiphon for mass on the Third Sunday of Advent for at least the past 1300 years. “Rejoice in the Lord always,” it begins. “I say it again,” Paul says. “Rejoice!” The first word for that antiphon in Latin is *Gaudete*, and that is why we still refer to this day as *Gaudete* Sunday. If you have an Advent wreath at home, this is the day you light the pink candle. It signifies that Advent is nearly over; Christmas is drawing near. We can already smell hot chocolate and cookies. We have every reason to rejoice.

This week Pope Francis inaugurated the Holy Year of Mercy by opening the holy door at St. Peter’s Basilica in Vatican City. Pilgrims pass through St. Peter’s Square and mount the steps toward the spacious front porch. From there, three sets of large doors give entry to the basilica. The doors on the far right side are usually bricked shut. Every 25 years - and on some other occasions - the pope declares a holy year and opens these doors so that pilgrims may enter through them. In our diocese the doors of several churches have been designated as holy doors so that we can enter them without having to go all the way to Italy. When you go to our cathedral, for example, you may pass through the holy door there. If you do it with the deep desire for true conversion, go to confession, participate in the eucharist with a reflection on mercy, profess the creed, and pray for the pope and his intentions, you receive an indulgence. An indulgence is more than forgiveness of sins; it remits the punishment that follows sin. Sometimes when someone forgives you, they still punish you. An indulgence removes even that punishment. It is a sign of God’s mercy.

We are called to extend this same mercy to all those we meet. At a time when our nation is seeing unprecedented signs of religious bigotry, we should all root out the prejudices that we harbor in our hearts. Think about how you react when you see someone who dresses differently, has a different color skin, speaks a different language, and eats different food. Are you suspicious of them? Or are you grateful for the opportunities God gives you to enjoy the diversity of his creation? Mercy takes work, and the work begins in every person’s heart, starting with me and you.