



The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop
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Peace and Everything Good!

By Fr Chuck Faso, OFM (www.frchuckofm.org)

Advent-Christmas Season

The Season of Advent is here! The season of longing and waiting, the season of naming our fears and stirring up our hopes, the season of shorter days and longer nights, the season of staying in and staying warm, the season of less light and endless darkness, the season of quiet and inner listening. Once again, as if for the first time, we hang our advent wreaths of hope and bring out the purple vestments of longing. We live in this 21st Century with its wars and blessing, its hungers and desires, its accomplishments and failures. We are on the move and are called to stay in the struggle with the help God's grace and hope.



Though the days shorten and darkness seems to be conquering, Isaiah the Prophet lifts our hearts with his message of hope for our despair and light for the darkness: "Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, Jerusalem!" Lift it

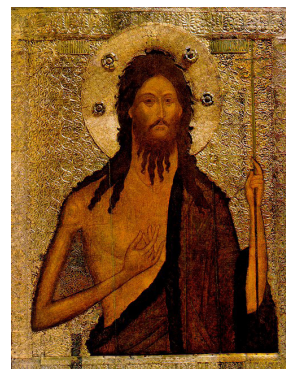
up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah: Here is your God!"

We are the new Zion, the New Jerusalem who needs to fear no more. The Bible states "Do not fear!" 366 times – one for each day of the year and one for leap year. We need only to listen and hear this good news. We will experience fear from many sources. The option is to choose not to become the fear, the despair, the darkness we feel. Name it! Claim it! Tame it! Advent offers us God's creative ways to tame our fears and

how to use in a positive way that energy that fear and all emotions stir up in us.

Isaiah stirs our hopes that all will change for the better: "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." No matter how bad or impossible our international or national, our family or personal situation is, all will get better. Trust in God! Listen to God! Do what God asks of us!

The English Thesaurus offers a list of words for the word Advent (that comes from the Latin *advenire*): arrival, start, beginning, coming on, dawn, initiation, introduction, the arrival of something important or awaited. Advent's other voice is that of John the Baptizer. John the Baptizer



announced all that – the arrival of someone who would change everything, the start of something new, the beginning of a new way of thinking and being for one another, God's kingdom coming into our hearts and minds in a totally new way, the dawn of justice that pushes back the darkness of hatred and prejudice.

There once was a Rabbi who asked his students this question: When does night end and day begin? No student came up with the correct answer. So the Rabbi told them: Night ends and day begins when we can look on the face of every person we meet and we recognize them as our brother and our sister, then night ends and day begins.

The darkness of the longest day of the year, December 21, gives way to an added two minutes of sunshine each day until June 21. By December 25, we know

that darkness has lost again the battle with the sun. The seemingly unstoppable darkness which has been conquering light since last June 21 now recedes. The Romans celebrated the victory of the Unconquerable Sun God on December 25 with great fires and festivities. We Christians in Rome in 325 AD announced that we know the name of the Unconquerable and Victorious God, not the Sun God but the Son of God, Jesus. And so began the celebration of Christmas on December 25 in Europe. In Egypt and the East the birth of Christ was celebrated on January 6, the day the God of the Nile flooded the land with new fertility. The Christians in Egypt celebrated January 6 as the birthday of the God of all life, Jesus the Christ – the Anointed one, the Messiah! Gradually, east and west borrowed and celebrated each other's feast.

December 25th begins two weeks of celebrating and remembering God's great Love enfleshed in a helpless baby born in Bethlehem – a baby named Jesus. For two weeks we continue to return to that crib scene to look again, to rub our eyes for a clearer look, to see Shepherds and Magi, to see a Holy Family of Mary and Joseph with Jesus, to see a donkey and a cow and remember Isaiah 1:3 – "An ox knows its owner and an ass its master's manger, but Israel does not know, my people have not understood." How blessed we are that we can see with faith and we know that the Infant in the manger is Jesus, our Lord and Savior. We thank God too for St Francis of Assisi who in 1223 in a cave in Greccio, Italy in the Rieti Valley, gathered the townsfolk for a midnight mass so they could experience the poverty of the Lord Jesus' birth. Thus, the custom of having Manger scenes and Crib sets under our Christmas trees for this feast.

The Advent Wreath

The Advent wreath is part of our long-standing Catholic tradition. However, the actual origins are uncertain. There is evidence of pre-Christian Germanic peoples using wreathes with lit candles during the cold and dark December days as a sign of hope in the future warm and extended-sunlight days of Spring. In Scandinavia during winter, lighted candles were placed around a wheel, and prayers were offered to the god of light to turn "the wheel of the earth" back toward the sun to lengthen the days and restore warmth. In other northern European countries the advent wreath was an act of sacrifice to the gods so that darkness would not prevail.



The sacrifice was to remove one of the wheels of a cart that was used daily. The wheel was hung and decorated with greens and candles to please the gods. Each year the gods accepted the sacrifice by returning the sun and limiting the darkness.

By the Middle Ages, the Christians adapted this tradition and used Advent wreathes as part of their spiritual preparation for Christmas. After all, Christ is "the Light that came into the world" to dispel the darkness of sin and to radiate the truth and love of God (cf. John 3:19-21). By 1600, both Catholics and Lutherans had more formal practices surrounding the Advent wreath.

The symbolism of the Advent wreath is full of meaning. The wreath is made of various evergreens, signifying continuous life. Even these evergreens have a traditional meaning which can be adapted to our faith: The laurel signifies victory over persecution and suffering; pine and holly, immortality; and cedar, strength and healing. Holly also has a special Christian symbolism: The prickly leaves remind us of the crown of thorns, and one English legend tells of how the cross was made of holly. The circle of the wreath, which has no beginning or end, symbolizes the eternity of God, the immortality of the soul, and the everlasting life found in Christ. Any pine cones, nuts, or seedpods used to decorate the wreath also symbolize life and resurrection. All together, the wreath of evergreens depicts the immortality of our soul and the new, everlasting life promised to us through Christ, the eternal Word of the Father, who entered our world becoming true man and who was victorious over sin and death through His own passion, death, and resurrection. The four candles represent the four weeks of Advent

Longing for the coming of Jesus urges us to sacrifice, to say no to something so that we can say yes to the Someone who is coming. "O Come, O Come Emmanuel! And ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear. Rejoice! Rejoice Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel!" We are Israel of today! And the Lord is coming – today, tomorrow, and at the end of time.

Christmas comes in the quiet of the night. A baby's innocent cry pierces the hardness of dark hatred and prejudice. There is room for all people around the crib

– Shepherds and Magi, old and young, wise and simple, white and black, brown and yellow and red, the LGBT and the straight, the Pope and the unbeliever. No one can resist the innocence and beauty, the openness and goodness of a baby. What a mighty, creative, love-filled God we have! What other God would leave all that it means to be God and put on our weak flesh – flesh that experiences cold and hunger, exhaustion and pain, hope and joy! A blessed Advent and Joy-filled Christmas to you all!

Pilgrimages to the Holy Land



From October 21 to November 3, 2010, I was blessed to be in the Holy Land for my twenty-ninth pilgrimage. Always the same, and always quite different. We were thirty-seven pilgrims. This time I was on the staff of the Franciscan Pilgrimage Programs who for thirty-five years have focused

their ministry of pilgrimages to Assisi, Rome, Florence, Greccio, LaVerna, and other Franciscan shrines of St Francis, St Clare, St Anthony, St Bonaventure, etc. For the last eight years, the Franciscan Pilgrimage Programs (www.FranciscanPilgrimages.com) have extended their service with pilgrimages to the Holy Land.

We stayed in two Franciscan Hotels for Pilgrims called Casa Nova. The first was in Nazareth across the street from the Basilica of the Annunciation built over the grotto which according to tradition was the home where Mary was visited by the Angel Gabriel. Several churches were built over this spot through the centuries. Each new church – Byzantine, Crusader, 20th Century - incorporated the previous foundations of the earlier church. Each new church increased in size with new art and beauty. From Nazareth we visited the Sea of Galilee, about 20 miles away. We descended from Nazareth which is 1500 feet above sea level to the Sea of Galilee which is 700 feet below sea level. We also celebrated Masses in Nazareth and in Capernaum

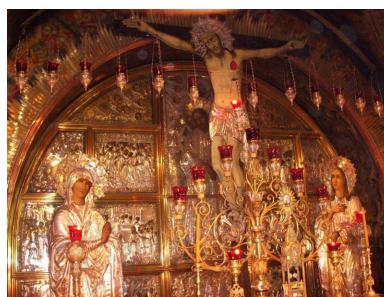


on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee (a lake about 9 miles by 13 miles). Vans drove us to the top of Mount Tabor, the place where we remember the Transfiguration of Jesus with Moses and Elijah. With smiles and tears, the married couples of our group had the opportunity to renew their marriage vows in Cana.

The boat ride on the Sea of Galilee is always a beautiful experience – we stopped the boat and read passages from the Gospels that describe Jesus calming the storm and walking on the water, as Jesus calms the storms in our hearts.

Then we traveled 90 miles from Nazareth, along the Jordan River valley through the West Bank to Jericho, one of the oldest cities in the world where Jesus healed the blind man and called Zachaeus down from the sycamore tree. After a stop under a sycamore tree and reading the Gospel story, we drove up to Jerusalem, from 1400 feet below sea level to 2400 feet above sea level. Five miles passed Jerusalem we stopped in Bethlehem at our hotel for the next two nights.

Mass the next morning was in the Grotto of the Nativity on the altar of the Magi's adoration. A few feet away was the silver star that marks the traditional place where Jesus was born. The Latin words on the star read: Jesus the Lord was born HERE. We sang many Christmas carols. It is always Christmas in Bethlehem. This Christmas, those old familiar carols will have a deeper meaning with the added memories of Bethlehem.



Our last several days found us in Jerusalem staying at the Casa Nova in the Old City, a five minute walk from the Holy Sepulcher. Both Calvary and the empty Tomb of Jesus

are in this very large and ancient church. Thousands of pilgrims climb the stairs to the top of Calvary where each person can touch the top of the rock where Jesus died on the cross. We returned home on November 3. Hearing the Gospels and reading the Bible will never be quite the same again.

From November 29 to December 8, Fr Bill Burton OFM and I will be leading 80 pilgrims from Chicago and from Tampa FL to the Holy Land. Next fall I will be on the staff for two pilgrimages organized by the

