

Second Sunday in Advent (B), Dec. 7, 2014

“Who will be our pastor when Father Parker is killed?”

Isaiah 40:1–11; Psalm 85:9–14; 2 Peter 3:8–14; Mark 1:1–8

“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God” (Is 40:1)

Father William C. Graham | St. Michael’s in Duluth

In Advent of 1996, I was living in Harlem, on the upper east side of Manhattan. I had come from Duluth, which had a black population of six-tenths of one percent. In my Harlem neighborhood in the 1990s, the white population was six-tenths of one percent. My meditation in the 1996 Advent season began with Brother Timothy’s report a few weeks earlier that in his fifth grade religion class at All Saints School, children did not ask how is it that Christ is present in the eucharist, nor when the gospels were written, but: “Who will be our principal when Sister Marguerite is killed?” And, “Who will be our pastor when Father Parker is killed?”

Killing and crack and abandonment were very clear issues for those

children. We knew then that, in the nineties, HIV infection killed more Black Americans aged 25-44 than any other cause. Even before the AIDS explosion, life expectancy for African American men in Harlem was lower than in Bangladesh. Those are problems about which astute readers of the *New York Times*, *Daily News* and *Amsterdam News* already knew.

As I consider our challenges here at St. Michael's as we prepare to enter the Year of Our Lord 2015, I keep in mind that in 1939, Msgr. William McCann, then a Harlem pastor, wrote in a "Confidential Report," to the Archbishop of New York that "no one who has not lived in Harlem for years can appreciate the problems that the church must face there." I spent five years there: long enough only to formulate some questions; not long enough to know the answers. Those questions have followed me home from New York, back here to Lakeside, the same place from which I left to move east.

There in Harlem and here in Duluth, we do know Advent challenges. We look for and hope to find the assurance that faith gives as we confront problems that challenge us in our neighborhoods and in our parish. There, the faithful face of our neighborhood was not easily seen by newspaper reporters or tour buses that made their way through Harlem. Here, we have reduced our church's seating capacity by about one third, and still seem to have all the room we need. There and here, and in Ferguson, Missouri, we find

it difficult to have the conversations that are necessary for healing and for hope. It is our faith that keeps us alive and alert. Faith keeps us confident that the challenges that greet us are for us Christians a reflection and reminder of the difficulties suffered by the people of Israel to whom the Prophet Isaiah spoke. Isaiah laments over the misfortunes that have fallen upon God's people, but the prophet continues quickly with a prayer for God's mercy. He begs God not only to remember the wonders he performed in former ages, but to renew them in the present age.

We, too, pray for God's mercy, even as we are attentive to all the kindness and goodness that God shows to us in a variety of ways through any number of persons. Back east, we heard good Fr. Parker, very much alive, speak with a voice like Isaiah's when he begged our neighbors to "be, not flee."

We who are gathered here by the breath of God's spirit are given Advent assurance. We hear Isaiah the Prophet deliver God's message: "*Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God*" (Is 40:1). The remarkable faith, which animates the Church communities there in Harlem and here in Duluth, includes stories to inspire rejoicing and gladness. Our gatherings around book and table are, as Vatican II tells us, both the source and summit of our life together. Here is the place and activity from which our powers flow, the source of the grace that strengthens us to meet our challenges. Here we

celebrate and model the peace that will heal all wounds.

A friend at St. Augustine's in the South Bronx told me back then that he worked all his adult life in the tunnels and on the subway trains, but it was the Sunday eucharist prayed together with loving friends that gave him the strength and the ability to go on. He, Mr. Nichols, spoke not just as a wise elder of the community, he spoke also as a theologian, one who understands the working of God in our very midst, one who knows and celebrates the role of the church in changing our lives and transforming the face of the earth.

Here, then, is our task as the church at work in the world: to model peace, to celebrate hope, to work for transformation, to be the wounded healer in a weary world.

One of our most important invitations, I think, is to listen to our young people, challenging them, encouraging them, inviting them to do and be as good and as strong as they possibly can. Many of our young people do not regularly have conversations with their elders; this might be a problem we can easily fix. Our young must daily decide for themselves if they wish to embrace life or death, love or hate, light or darkness. The phenomena that make their choices so very difficult, I do not always understand.

Young Washington stopped to see me one day at my office in the College where I taught in those days. He was a 20 year-old college student who grew

up in the Projects and on the streets. He was very bright, but very undisciplined. He knew that he was smart, and that he needed to get down to business. But he hadn't. "Next semester, I hope," he asserted. Or excused.

"I told my dad, I gotta get focused," he reported.

"Do you want to be poor all your life?" I asked.

"No! I sure don't!" he quickly responded. He stopped to think. "I don't want to do that," he added, then asked:

"How come guys like you, black or white, look at me and tell me that I can do anything, that I can, if I want to, transform the face of the earth?" He really asked this; he really said, "transform the face of the earth."

"Two reasons," I responded. First, there are a lot of good folks around, black and white. I want to be one of them. Secondly, you can do it, and that's why we tell you."

He did not ask more. We sat in silence.

I told Washington the story that Jesus told his disciples, "Be constantly on the watch! Stay awake! You do not know when the appointed time will come."

"Really?" He was amazed.

"Really!"

"I've never heard that story before," he said. His eyes began to cloud,

and then tears squirted from his eyes, falling rapidly down his face and, I am not kidding, bounce off his black nylon winter coat. He found a paper towel on my shelf (the Kleenex had run out), washed his face with his tears, and was silent again.

“I’m thinking,” he explained. “Can I just sit here?”

“Of course.”

Telling each other the stories is somehow the beginning. Waiting in patient silence is also part of the picture and the process as well. Sometimes tears. Sometimes false starts. Sometimes disappointment. Always hope.

Paul promised the Corinthians and promises us that, as we wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, He will strengthen us to the end, so that we will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We do not know when that day will be. So, says Jesus: “Be constantly on the watch! Stay awake!...Do not let him come suddenly and catch you asleep.”

Prayer of the Faithful

- 2nd Sunday in Advent | December 6 & 7, 2014

That every member of the Church of God may be “awake and sober,” that through our service and generosity to others, we may proclaim the joy of Christ’s birth and prepare the way for His coming in glory, we pray:

For all of our leaders, that they encourage Christians to wait for the return of Jesus in vigilance, using our talents to spread the good news, drawing other people to recognize their own immense value, we pray:

For parents, teachers, catechists, and all those involved in the lives of children, that through their example of faith they may instill in our young people a love for the Lord and His Church, we pray:

For the will to seek a spirit of reconciliation, in Ferguson, Missouri, in New York City, and in every place, and in every heart; and for the wisdom to seek healing together, we pray:

For an increased understanding that our parish is where the Church lives; that we are a community of faith, of action, and of hope; that our parish be a place where the gospel is proclaimed and celebrated, where believers are formed and sent to renew the earth, we pray:

That each of us do what we are obliged and called to do; that our parish be blessed with the generous support of all our members, each contributing, time, talent and treasure, we pray:

That we who are comfortable might make ourselves a bit less comfortable; that those who are not so fortunate might receive what they truly need, we pray:

May all of our beloved dead, and all who have gone before us as friends of God, see the face of God, and join in an endless song of praise and thanksgiving for ever and ever: AMEN!

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(Saturday Night & Sunday Morning) St Michael's School parents and The Knights of Columbus are hosting a pancake breakfast after the 8:00 and 10:30 Masses this weekend. The cost is \$5 per person or \$25 per family for a plate full of delicious food, and all the proceeds benefit the school. We hope you'll join us!

Immaculate Conception Masses: Monday at 10:30 AM and 6 PM.

(Saturday only): It's your last chance to hear the beautiful music of the choirs of the College of St. Scholastica. Their final Christmas concert is tonight, here at St. Michael's, beginning at 7:30. It's a wonderful program and tickets are only \$5 at the door.

(All masses): Children's choir on Thursday at 5:45. We will sing for the 4:00 pm Christmas Eve Mass.

(All masses): Come join our parish choir for Christmas. It's not too late! Meet us in rehearsal at 6:30 on Wednesdays. We will sing for the Midnight Mass this Christmas. No voice is ever turned away.

I think it is time to reform and reinvigorate our Parish Council. We should have, I think, eight or ten members. The parish council, I think, should be the group that advises the pastor, and evaluates and encourages the developing life of our parish; I will depend on the Council

as partners in conversation as we make our way by the light of the Gospel. We should probably meet monthly. I invite your input; if you wish to recommend someone, or would like to serve, please let me know.

During Advent, we will continue to offer the sacrament of reconciliation on Wednesdays and Fridays after the 5 PM Mass, and also on Saturday afternoon, from 3:30 until 4:15; also, remember that Mass is offered here every day of the week at 5 PM.

You will find a parish staff member at the help desk in the gathering space today; stop there with any questions or comments!

And please remember: Visit us online at stmichaelsduluth.org; like us on Facebook; and follow us on Twitter!