

4th SUNDAY in ADVENT (B-4) (Translation) **We are favored by God.**

If we reflect upon the effect that Christmas has on the world each year, what could we conclude with? Well, if we exclude the hype of the malls and TV, and the need to buy gifts for others, and the need to cook up a storm, we could see what a miracle this season is in the hearts of us humans. What humbles me and makes me feel blessed is to see how people become soft, compassionate and loving, something that as a priest, I wish could last all year and every year.

History tells us that in war, when Christmas Eve comes, both sides make a truce, a cease fire, an action of peace, so that the violence stops, even for just the night. The higher value is peace on earth, goodwill to all. People who have ignored their faith-life all year seem to approach the Church hoping in the miracle of Christmas. People who disdain the poor all year suddenly donate out of compassion to organizations or churches in the hope of helping people celebrate God's Christmas love.

The miracle of God's love, in electing to send his son so that we see and believe in God-with-us, Emmanuel, leads us to the knowledge that we are in God's image and likeness when we love as God loves us. Love without a condition or limit, heals, cures, saves and transforms the receiver and the giver both. The only obstacle to love is fear.

Sensing Mary's fear, the angel Gabriel, God's messenger, attempts to cast out her fear: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. You will conceive and bear a Son, and you will name him Jesus (which means one-who-saves)." The Bible is filled with references to "be not afraid." God knows that the one who is afraid to live, has already died inside. God also knows that when we dare to live in love for another person, we are healed of what has hurt us in life. Mary, by letting herself be touched by God, receives the gift of being able to change the world in saying, "Be it done to me according to your Word."

The invitation to change the world is made to us each year. Many, however, let ourselves be moved by fear & doubt, but each year God invites us to let ourselves be used as Mary did. God's will is that we love as God loves us. God's will is that both sides of all conflicts sit down and decide for the higher value of peace to resolve the conflict. God's will is that we worship, pray, study and do good works, in other words, live our Mission Statement and not just say it.

What happens here at MHT each week is a miracle. We have people of every race, color, size, sexual preference, citizens and immigrants of all nations, speaking 5 or more languages, and all coming together to worship God-with-us, who made us just the way we are. Mary is one of us. So is Jesus. Jesus is both God-with-us and God-like-us. By becoming one of us, Jesus says we are God's favored. Are our lives showing the world that we believe this or not? The words of Gabriel to Mary are also meant for us: "Do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God."

A week from today we begin the Christmas season, which will last only 2 weeks this year. Our challenge is to make a New Year's resolution to live our Mission Statement from our heart. Let us resolve to worship, pray, study and do good works because love demands it. May we see that doing this comes from the same grace Mary received, and may we be rewarded to hear from God, "Come, blessed favorites of my Father, and inherit the kingdom prepared for you since the beginning of time." Merry Christmas to you all!