December 22- 23, 2012
FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Our journey through Advent has led us to consider the coming of the Lord, the word of the Lord, and the way of the Lord. And now, two days before the celebration of Christmas, we hear scriptures that point to the promise of the Lord. What is this precious promise soon to be wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger? Who is this One whose promise prophets foretold and before whom shepherds will bow? Our Scriptures reveal this promise of the Lord and invite us to revel in its mystery.

Did you hear the glimmer of the promise in the reading from Micah? In those lines written some 500 years before our Lord’s birth is the promise that is Bethlehem. In Hebrew, Bethlehem is actually two words: “Beth” meaning “house”, and “lechem” which means “bread.” Beth-lechem or Bethlehem is “House of bread.” This tiny hamlet just an easy walk south of Jerusalem, is the place from which God’s promise
will come. Until this promise tumbled out of Micah’s mouth, no one ever thought anyone of any consequence, much less a ruler, would come from Bethlehem.

Micah’s naming of Bethlehem as the place from which the Messiah would come was outlandish – improbable – some would say crazy. But some promises are like that, aren’t they? Why, we have a phrase in our language that makes light of big promises. We say, “He’s promising the moon” meaning the words within the promise are so outrageously unbelievable, that no one would ever think them possible. When Micah announced that Bethlehem would be the place from which the promised ruler would come, he was promising the moon and asking us to believe it with him. It was a crazy idea, but God was in it.

Likewise, when the Blessed Virgin Mary and Elizabeth met that day long ago, Luke tells us the baby in Elizabeth’s womb “leapt for joy” at the sound of Mary’s voice. The Holy Spirit quickened words on Elizabeth’s tongue as she said to Mary: “Blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” The promise of the Lord was within both of those holy women as John turned in Elizabeth’s womb and Mary carried the life of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Can such a promise quicken new life within us? And if so, how does it or how can it awaken us to the gift coming our way this Christmas? The scriptures give us a good word – really good news – that just might turn these last crazy hours before Christmas into the celebration of great joy Christmas can be in all our lives. Who but God knows what promised Christmas gift might be coming our way?

So why don’t we first take up and into ourselves the promise that is ours where we live. Bethlehem – House of bread – can actually be code language for any place, any town, any address where God nourishes our lives. Travel the world over and you will discover that in every culture, bread is the staff of life. Whether it is a French baguette or Italian focaccia, a plain white loaf or a slice of white pizza hot from the oven…,
bread can become a meal when nothing else is there. “Carbs” be
darned… bread!

The promise of the Lord shows up right where we are, as a warm
loaf of nourishing *spiritual* bread. Isn’t it strange that we dress up our
homes and churches, light our streets, and adorn our towns for the
holiday season to remind us all that holiness and wonder wraps its magic
around our lives in what is, for the rest of the year, an ordinary street or
simple room? The message of Christmas is many things, but high on
that list is how divine mystery visits common, off-beat places like
Bethlehem. Bethlehem is shorthand for the unexpected ordinary.

Parents and grandparents would be wise to take note of this great
truth somewhere on your list of gifts for your little ones. We who live in
the most affluent nation on earth, year after year, pride ourselves on
celebrating Christmas. Am I right in saying what all of us know? That
our national economy requires a “big” Christmas – more sales, more
gifts, and more commerce? Please don’t hear me being a Scrooge when
it comes to giving gifts. I enjoy giving and receiving them like you. The danger in Christmas, however, is equating “much” with “meaning,” and in so doing missing miracles wrapped in the ordinary.

Christmas “bread” could be calling a halt to the frenetic pace at which we rush through these last pre-Christmas hours and looking deeply into the eyes of your spouse, your child, your parents, a beloved friend, and telling them what a precious gift they are to you. Nothing is quite so extraordinary as an ordinary, sincere, heart-felt expression of love. The promise of the Lord is wrapped in such gifts. This year, give them often and generously.

I see one other promise in our lessons that may be stretching a point, but I have to stretch it and share it because I believe it’s there. Do you remember that moment as Luke tells the story when Mary and Elizabeth came into each other’s presence. Luke tells us the baby in Elizabeth’s womb (whom we know as John the Baptist) – or was it the baby in Mary’s womb (our Lord Jesus Christ)? – “leaped”. In fact, the
ancients were so unsure about which baby did the leaping, that the song that follows we know as “Magnificat” is sung – in some old versions of the Bible, by Elizabeth. What if both children in their mother’s wombs leaped? What if that meeting of those holy women was a “leaping” moment of recognition that invites us to leap for joy as well?

Here I am talking about Advent peace, knowing full well that there are 28 families in Connecticut whose Christmas will be dark, broken and drear. That there are parishes that will have black drapes as well as Christmas trees. Can we, from our comfort and blessing offer just a moment of deeply felt prayer for those who have been so affected by senseless death? Even aware of such incredible pain, Advent still rings out with hope and promise.

God is always bringing to life something in our lives that has a leaping, joyous, magnificent quality about it. I know it’s a stretch – but maybe not! – but this year, this season, perhaps even today, someone you know and love has an unborn dream, a pre-natal promise, a godly purpose for life that would “leap” to life if you would bless them, touch
them with love, and affirm their dream. That same kind of **dream**—
**vision**—**promise** is in your life as well awaiting the blessing another
may generously give you.

Can you see it? Would it be too much to ask if you could feel it?
God is breaking into the ordinary-ness of our lives to quicken a dream, a
vision, a new chapter rife with the promises our Lord Jesus Christ comes
to give. And you, my friend, may be the very person God will use to
cause that dream to leap up, to come to life in another this Christmas.
That is the miracle of these days, the promise of God’s Christ, and the
wonder that awaits us in Bethlehem.