

Baccalaureate Mass

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December 14, 2007 | St. Ignatius Church

Readings: Is. 40:3-5 & 61:1-2, Jn 1:6-8

Today's readings are appropriate for this Eucharistic celebration of your completing your Jesuit education here at USF. The first reading acknowledges and celebrates the Spirit of God given to each of us, so that we may be good news for our world – that is our prayer for you today. The second reading introduces one “sent from God” to witness to true light amidst the darkness of our human condition – that, too, is our prayer for you today.

When the first reading talks of filling valleys, leveling mountains and laying a highway over rough terrain, it is speaking the language of metaphor, not that of civil engineering. Voices cry out from the desert to us, begging us to level mountains of prejudice and suspicion; to narrow the widening gap that separates the masses of the poor from the wealthy few; to offer services and support for those whose lives are rough and difficult; to lift up the lonely and the broken-hearted among us.

In the second reading the voice of God cries out through a spokesperson named John. John was sent “to testify to the light so that all might believe through him.” What is it that all might believe through the testimony of John's life? Perhaps, they might come to believe in a good God who loves them without reservation. John's call – ours, as well – is to live our lives so that others may come to believe and trust in goodness and love which we name “God.”

This past week, I received an email from a friend of mine. Kevin and his wife Trena teach college students in El Salvador and have three young girls. The mother of one of their students was dying of cancer, and Kevin and Trena decided to visit her. They debated about whether to bring their girls along on the visit, and finally decided to go ahead. When they entered the dark, dirt-floored shack, Sophia [age 7] went right up to the dying woman, picked up her hand and started to rub it gently while she looked into the woman's eyes. Kevin wrote:

“I was really touched by Sophia's loving gestures towards this older woman. I thought the kids might be afraid or hesitant to see her. After a while, Sophia gently set the woman's hand back down on the bed and went out to play with the other kids. Then she returned again to spend time with the dying woman. That night, Sophia asked Trena right before she went to bed, ‘Mommy is what Teresita's mom has contagious?’ I was struck that she was so loving and affectionate while at the same time thinking that it could be contagious.”

Sophia's unself-conscious, loving gestures make it easier for all of us to come to believe and trust in goodness and love which we name “God.”

At the funeral of an older woman that I celebrated several years ago, her teenage grandson recalled his grandmother with great affection. He told a story about how he used to play hide-and-go-seek with her, and he always won. He found her, but she had the hardest time finding him. Even at the time, he thought it was odd that she would

show him where to hide and then not be able to find him. He said it took him several years to realize that it was not that he was so clever, but that his grandmother was so good. She made it possible for him to believe and trust in goodness and love which we name "God."

I remember a Christmas many years ago when I was about 7 years old. I had decided to keep my single most desired Christmas gift a secret from everyone but Santa Claus. I dutifully wrote my requests to Santa and showed them to my mom, but added a drum set to the list at the very last minute and unbeknownst to her. On Christmas eve, when we were driving home late at night in pouring rain from dinner at my grandparents, I announced to my parents that I had also asked Santa for a drum set, knowing that it was too late for them to do anything about my request, and thereby definitively disprove the existence of Santa Claus.

You can imagine my surprise the next day when I found a shiny new drum set under the tree with my name on it. At some level, I knew even then that Santa did not work this miracle. I remember being momentarily overwhelmed by my parents' love. I later learned that my father had driven all over Los Angeles in the rain until he found an open Rexall drug store in South Central that had a drum set. I have been blessed with parents who make it possible for me to believe and trust in goodness and love which we name God.

Now is a good time for you graduates to look back at those who have helped smooth the rough spots in your life, lifted up your fading spirits, mended your breaking heart, liberated you from ignorance and fear, and been lights in your dark moments. Now is the time for you to realize that it is your turn to do what others have done for you: to testify to the light, to be glad tidings, to author such goodness and love in your lives that others may come to believe and trust in goodness and love which we name God. Now is the time to acknowledge the Spirit with which we are all blessed, to celebrate all that we been given which makes us likely witnesses to the light that God shines on this world in the person of Jesus and those of us who believe and trust in him.

As you leave the Hilltop, do not to stifle the Spirit of God with which you have been gifted; let that Spirit resonate through your whole person so that your life reflects the one true light shining through the darkness, and so that others may catch a glimpse of and come to believe and trust in the goodness and love that sustains us on our journey. Let us move together now to the table and receive the nourishment and strength we need to fill valleys, level mountains, and lay the highway that will bring us all safely home.