

I suppose some of you stayed up rather late last weekend – with parties and what have you – celebrating the new liturgical year! For those of you who do not know, the new liturgical year started Saturday evening of last weekend. We moved from year B with its respective readings to year C with its respective readings. Last year we journeyed with St. Mark and this year it will be with St. Luke.

You might have also noticed that last weekend's reading concerned the end of the world symbolically correlating to the end of the liturgical year and its theme of the final coming of Christ. Now, however, the Church is shifting our attention back to Christ's first coming in the incarnation in the birth of Christ at Bethlehem. Last weekend we were looking ahead and this weekend we now begin to look back.

It has been a whole year since we left Bethlehem and now we find ourselves heading back there once again. We hear the familiar reading every year at this time, exhorting us to prepare the way for the Lord.

Perhaps though for some it might be we first have to find our way back to Bethlehem, to the child, before we can prepare a way for him.

-The year has brought many changes to our lives – some good and some not so good. For some the year has brought great joy and for others heartbreaking events. And yet for many, financially speaking, it has been more difficult than good.

+Many years ago our family was making annual trip to the Outer Banks for vacation. For some reason, my younger brother, Kelly, ended up as a driver with my sister and at that time, her two very young children. Along with the kids, my sister fell asleep only to find herself awakened to downtown Norfolk. There had never been a trip which took us through Norfolk to get to the Outer Banks. My brother had taken a very bad turn into a very bad neighborhood for what was once a very familiar trip.

Funny story, but true in so many other ways. We go our regular familiar way each year and all looks great. And then, boom, we are set off course. Some may find themselves in a rough place, feeling somewhat lost. We find a mountain of debt which was not there last year or a valley empty of choices when we last journeyed to Bethlehem.

+Some of you may have been here when my friend Fr. Mike Jolley spoke of being lost on a mountain hike with me. For those who do not know Fr. Mike, he is blind. Walking, I would tell Mike, "*Hang on, it is pretty narrow here.*" All I meant was that the footing was difficult; never realizing that my description of narrow for him meant an imagined cliff that with one misstep could mean plummeting to our deaths.

That is how it is sometimes with life – we get a little lost and then begin to imagine the worse and our lives become a bit confusing and dark. T.S. Eliot said that he wished his gravestone to read: "*I've had the experience, but I've missed the meaning.*" Sounds as if he got stuck in the negatives. One commentator, speaking about the recession put it this way: "*Due to the current financial crises, the light at the end of the tunnel has been turned off.*"

+A dear parishioner wrote me a while back, with the letter containing a number of comic strips. And at the end of it all she wrote, *"I haven't heard you laugh in a good while."* It kinda jolted me, because I think it was true.

Just as all of you struggle with different issues, your priest can also get caught in the negative, with mountains of worries and the barren valley of the day to day grinds. Her words, though, worked to redirect me toward Bethlehem, a place of laughter. And perhaps, then, Advent is a time we can work on leveling those mountains and fill our valleys to lift us up.

At our convocation one of the speakers posed a question to us, asking, *"What is the opposite of depression?"* It is not to simply *"think positive"* or that we need only *"to get hold of ourselves and snap out of it."*

*The opposite of depression, he said, is **delight**.*

*To delight in something means being **spontaneously surprised** by the goodness and beauty of living. One can't crank it up and make it happen.

*It is the **something that happens to us**, but never on our own do we make it happen. To delight is to **catch us unaware**, where we are *not rationalizing* that we are happy.

*It is a moment where **we connect** and it truly feels **great to be alive**. I would add that **these moments originate in God** and we need only to open our eyes and hearts to connect into them.

Delight can be rare for adults – though not for children (from healthy homes). He said, *"If you want to see delight, watch children at play as they run around and shriek with delight."*

+While I was at home for Thanksgiving, a number of us decided to head out to the movies on Saturday evening of that week. It was Jim Carey's *Scrooge* and I had my young nephew next to me. Listening to his giggles and seeing the gleam in eyes, found myself connecting into his delight and my mountain began to move and I caught glimpses of Bethlehem.

"In western culture", the speaker pointed out, "the joyous shouting of children often irritates us because it interferes with our depression as we sedate spontaneous joy."

+The comedian Carol Burnet experienced this in church. She said she was watching the child in front of her smiling back her, to which the adult said, *"Turn around get that smile off your face."*

+A young mother told me how someone in church snapped at her saying, *"Tell your children to stop touching my pew."*

And that is what makes it very difficult for us to find our way back to Bethlehem. Have you ever been sedated by someone? They just suck all the life and joy out of you.

John the Baptist knew something about delight – very early on – when his mother Elizabeth was pregnant with John, she met with Mary, pregnant with Jesus and we are told that John leapt with delight at the presence of Christ.

It was a delight he never let go of, yet John also had to journey into the desert – to the difficult place all of us have had to journey. At times we have to experience the absence of Christ to appreciate his presence. And yet when John the Baptist emerged from the desert and reconnected with his people, there was surely delight as he shouted out, *“Make way for the Lord!”*

+Last week’s Christmas Concert was such an example for me of delight. We all connected in the music and this experience carried over to the break. In this I experienced joy, being connected into all, with people waving and what have you.

+A woman came up to me and said, *“You don’t remember me, but I was at your ordination and have been following you ever since.”* (I should add that she was not twenty or thirty-something!) And yet it was a moment that I felt sincere delight in my vocation to the priesthood as she had felt the same way - it was a connecting in the delight of the moment.

This can always be our experience in Mass, when we leave all the stuff of our journey, our desert experience, such as our anger, our worries, our judgments, and just live in the delight of one another.

If you find yourselves forgetting, look to the little ones, who with complete abandon hug us. That is a charge of true delight.

+I remember at one particular Mass there was a family with three or four little ones sitting in the front pew. As I went down to receive the gifts, they were waving frantically, *“Hey Father Patrick! Hey!”* Yes, there is Delight.

When we allow ourselves to connect into this, we can surely say that on our tombstone, we can have inscribed, *“I’ve had the experience and found the meaning.”* No, the light has not been turned off. You need only drive around Richmond and see the many lights. They lead us to the way to Bethlehem, the *place of delight* and most certainly, *laughter*.