

November 30, 2014 ~ 1st Sunday Advent, Year B

The Door of Your Heart

Isaiah 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7; Mark 13:33-37

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*Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,
with the mountains quaking before you. ... Yet, O LORD,
you are our father; we are the clay and you the potter:
we are all the work of your hands. [Isaiah 63:19b, 64:7]*

I wonder if my first story today will get me in trouble with teenagers. Oh well ...

A mother in Texas, named Sharon Standifird, is livid when her teenage children don't reply to her repeated phone calls and text messages. Later, she learns they're safe and were simply ignoring her calls.

She thinks: "We need to develop an app that just shuts their phone completely down, and they can't even use it." So, she develops a cell phone app called *Ignore No More*. With it a parent can lock their child's phone from afar: no calls to friends, no text, no games, *nothing*. The child can call only parent-approved phone numbers, such as, Mom's and Dad's. Mom (or, Dad) can then decide whether or not to unlock their teenager's phone.

Sharon Standifird uses her *Ignore No More* app on her own kids, and it's working. They're calling or texting back quicker than before. Her son, Bradley, says: "I thought it was a good idea, but for other people, not me."

I thought about the *Ignore No More* app while preparing this homily. In today's first reading, the prophet Isaiah reflects on the Hebrew people's yearning for God during a dark time in their history. Prior to the passage we heard, Isaiah repeatedly challenges the king and the people to be faithful to God, but they refuse. They are like children who have wandered away from their parents. They refuse to listen to God. God doesn't have the phone app, *Ignore No More*, but God does have the prophet Isaiah. And when the nation collapses, the prophet understands it as resulting from their lack of faith.

In today's passage, the Hebrew people now understand their true purpose in life. They appeal to God as their Father, and they see themselves as God's children. They see that they have strayed. They fear that God now ignores them, and they appeal to God to appear to them. The Hebrew people feel distant from God.

And so, we begin this season of Advent with an Old Testament reading that speaks of our longing for God. Most of us experience that distance from God, brought on perhaps by our own refusal to be faithful to God, perhaps by our own refusal to listen to God.

That longing and emptiness can be especially strong during the darker periods of our lives: when we experience the loneliness of grief, or when we move elsewhere and find ourselves without the network of family and friends that knit us into a community, or when we are excluded because of our own poor choices or actions.

I think of my first Christmas after being in the seminary. The last mass concludes, and I finish the last of my responsibilities. I have presents for my family in hand and am heading to the rectory's back door when the doorbell rings.

The man standing there wants to talk with someone. Now, I really want to get to my sister's house for the family gathering, but I invite him in.

He says that he's not permitted to be with his wife and children that Christmas. When younger, he gets into drugs and alcohol and, in recent years, allows it to get out of hand. His addiction wrecks havoc on his marriage and on his ability to be a father to his children. He's lonely that Christmas and just wants to talk with someone.

He understands that he made choices that keep him from the people he dearly wants to be with. He's not angry about it, just lonely, and he's determined to make things right so he might be with his family not just for the next Christmas, but for every day of the year. I pray with him, and he then heads on his way.

Twenty-eight years later, I still wonder what he's doing this time of year.

When we feel distant from others, especially from the people most meaningful to us, it's easy to feel distant from God, too. The story of the ancient Hebrew people, longing for God to break into their lives, is our story, too.

Of course, Jesus doesn't have the phone app, *Ignore No More*, to get our attention with. So, we hear a Gospel proclamation reminding us to be *watchful* and *alert*, because we don't know when Jesus will come again. And the longing or emptiness we all can feel can serve to remind us that our greatest longing is for the presence of God. As put forth to us in the Bible, that longing finds its fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ.

I like how Pope Francis put it when he was in Korea in August and spoke to a youth gathering. Teenagers, what he said then applies to you (and also to me). He said:

Today Christ is knocking at the door of your heart.

I invite you to use Advent to create space for Jesus in your life. I invite you to commit five, fifteen, or thirty minutes each day to quiet prayer. Or, end each day by writing down the name of one person who made you feel a little less lonely or empty that day. Be

grateful that Christ came to you through that person. You don't need a phone app so Jesus won't ignore you. Jesus never ever ignores you and me.

Jesus knocks at the door of your heart when we proclaim the Gospel from this ambo.

Jesus knocks at the door of your heart when we recall his death and resurrection with bread and wine at this altar.

Jesus knocks at the door of your heart throughout this season of Advent.

I invite you to let your *Amen!* – your every *Amen!* – be the opening of the door of your heart.