

Second Sunday of Advent, 2019
Saint Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael A. Renninger

The young couple came into my office and announced that they were getting a divorce.

I knew this couple – he was in the military, she volunteered at the parish. I asked them to tell me what was going on.

Six months prior, the husband confessed to his wife that he had been unfaithful. He'd had an affair. The affair was now over.

And so was their marriage. Or so they said.

For six months, they tried to work through this painful revelation. Lots of conversations. Lots of tears. Some yelling. For the sake of their children, they tried. Yes, they prayed. But the pain was so deep.

They said that they came to the church that day because they wanted to learn more about the annulment process.

But truthfully, they were at church because they'd come to a conclusion, and the conclusion was this:

Since they did not know how to solve their problem, they concluded that the problem could not be solved.

It was at that point that I remembered a presentation I'd heard at the seminary. It was given by a man who was a Methodist minister and a psychiatrist. He told us that pastors should always listen to see if a couple or individual has come to that conclusion.

The Methodist minister told us that pastor should explore whether the struggling couple might be open to *another* truth, and it's this:

Just because you have a problem and *you* cannot figure out how to address it, that doesn't mean that it can't be addressed. Maybe there is someone out there who knows how!

And THAT is good news! If I have a challenge and I conclude: "I can't fix it!" I can either give up, or I can start to ask, "is there someone out there who DOES know how to help me?"

So I said to the couple sitting in my office: "You've concluded that reconciliation isn't possible. Are you sure that there isn't someone out there who might have some wisdom worth listening to?" Eventually they connected with a good counselor in that area. And I often saw them praying in the Blessed Sacrament Chapel.

Some 20 years later, they are still together... *happily* married! They reconciled, not because *they* knew how – but because they found *someone else* who could lead them in the right direction. Ultimately, they realized that the One who would show them how to reconcile was – God.

In today's first reading, the prophet Isaiah makes some crazy-sounding promises on God's behalf.

First, Isaiah promises that God has heard the weary prayers of the people, who – (see if this sounds familiar) – who are tired of political and religious leaders who *keep letting them down!*

So God promises through Isaiah that a new kind of leader is going to emerge. Listen to Isaiah's crazy talk! Isaiah says that there is a leader on the way who will be filled with God's spirit of wisdom and understanding. This leader will not judge others based on externals. And here's one for you, Isaiah says "Not by hearsay shall he decide." This leader will treat the poor with justice, and by his goodness he will force wickedness to flee. This will be a leader known for justice and faithfulness.

(Sounds just like Washington DC, doesn't it?)

Isaiah also says that when this righteous leader emerges, the world will change in ways that we probably think are impossible. Using scenes from nature, Isaiah says that this new leader will reconcile everyone and everything. There will no longer be natural enemies. There won't be hatreds or irreconcilable differences. No more winners and losers. No more problems that can't be solved.

Listen to what Isaiah says:

“The wolf will spend time with the lamb.” (Now, we didn't have wolves in my neighborhood in PA, but I did watch *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*. And I know one thing: If a wolf is anywhere near a lamb, it is for one purpose – the wolf is going to EAT the lamb!)

Wolves and lambs don't go to the Jefferson for Christmas Tea. They are innately at odds. But Isaiah says that reconciliation will happen.

Crazy. But Isaiah goes on:

“A baby cow will take a stroll with a lion.” And the lion will not eat the cow. (Apparently the lion became a vegan.)

“A little baby will sit next to a poisonous snake.” (Quick! Call Child Protective Services and have the parents arrested for neglect!)

In the 'real world,' wolves eat lambs, snakes bite children, lions munch on cows. This is the *real* 'circle of life,' the one that Disney doesn't write songs about.

In the real world as we know it, there are victors and victims. Something *has* lunch. Something *is* lunch. In the real world, there are natural enemies. And you can't change nature. You cannot reconcile them.

Isaiah – the crazy prophet - promises that transformative leadership is possible, and that there is no such thing as an irreconcilable difference. There is no such thing as an un-addressable problem.

I call Isaiah 'crazy', because we all know that this is not how the world works. Human leaders seem destined to always let us down. I call Isaiah 'crazy' because

we all know that some things can't be forgiven, some reconciliations can't happen, some problems can't be addressed. We all know that.

Ah, but maybe that's my mistake?

"*We* all know..." As we listen to Isaiah's gloriously outlandish promises, we may say to ourselves, "It would be wonderful if the world worked that way, but we human beings have been trying for thousands of years to create that kind of world, and we don't know how to do all of that."

That's right. WE DON'T KNOW. But just because WE don't know, doesn't mean that it can't be done.

There are so many things we don't know how to do... but God does.

There are so many things we don't know how to fix... but God does.

There are so many things we would love to forgive and reconcile. But we don't know how... God does.

There are so many things about us and our world that need to be transformed.

We've tried. We don't know how to get it right. God does.

This is the Advent point: we are invited to deep humility and honesty, so that we're finally able to say, "WE don't know how to fix it." But that doesn't mean it can't be fixed. So we turn to the One who knows how. And that One is the Lord.

This is the Advent truth that sets us free: to finally, really, humbly admit *that we need a savior*.

We self-reliant, self-directed Americans don't like to admit that.

But into every person's life, into every family's life, into every nation's life, comes the tragedy we don't know how to handle, the problem we don't know how to address, the hurt we don't know how to heal.

When such moments come, Isaiah's words fall like rain upon a parched and dry land.

We need a savior.

Oh wait. *We already have one!*

Remember that effective leader Isaiah talked about? The one who would change the world for the better? We know him. His name is Jesus. And everywhere that people follow his example and put his Gospel into practice, things begin to change... for the better.

Remember how Isaiah promised that this new leader would reconcile natural enemies and conquer what divides us? The Savior is already doing it! After all, Jesus embraced the enemy which devours all of us. He embraced *Death*. And he showed us that Death is no longer the victor, no longer gets the final word.

We didn't know how to conquer death. Be we met someone who knows how!

He overcame the challenge of Death. Shouldn't we turn to him with every problem we face?

John the Baptist cried out in the desert: "The one who is coming after me is mightier than I." That One came. He comes, right here, to this table. So come to him, with all that you don't know how to handle. And put it in his hands.