

# The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

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December 20, 2015

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

Don't trust the word of a stranger. What more basic and important instruction can a parent give to a child than that? It's in the very nature of children to trust in the truth of what they are told, which is why it sometimes seems such a harsh lesson to have to impart to young people. But to do otherwise is to expose them to real danger. The same is true for vulnerable adults. And those who would wish to exploit such people for their own advantage know this very well. Which is why the first effort in manipulating others is to convince them that they are not strangers at all.

It's a basic rule of advertising, for example, to presume to convince an audience that you know what they need and you have what they want. But let us be clear: Neither an internet provider, nor a movie maker, nor a food supplier, nor a drug company, nor a vacation vendor, nor a political candidate, nor even a pastor, knows what you need without first knowing you. And there is no shortcut: The only way to know you is to live, and move, and converse, and share life with you over a sustained period of time, live and in person. A Facebook friend is not somebody who knows you. Not yet. He/she has merely acquired a lot of data about you. A virtual or an internet buddy is something other than a real friend.

Think about the Christmas cards you are receiving this week. Some of mine are from people who know me inside out. Some of them are from people who've been sold a mailing list that has my name on it. Some are from people I haven't actually spoken to in years or even decades. (One is from the McDowell Agency!) All the cards express the same sentiments and words and greetings. Some of those cards I trust to be sincere. Some of them I regard as merely platitudes. No harm in them necessarily, but nothing to be taken too seriously, and certainly nothing to stake my future upon. There are some who say that they hope to see me soon, and I trust that they really do. There are others who say the same thing, and I know it is more nearly a matter of being polite. Again, there is nothing wrong in that, but I need to be wise and discerning.

Every morning this month on my way to church in the car, the radio station that I have on has been wishing me, in the most earnest tones possible, a blessed holiday season. If there is anything I can be sure about in all that is that the radio station could hardly care less about my experience of Christmas, so long as I stay tuned. There's a risk of being cynical here, but the basic instinct must remain: Don't trust strangers.

Why is any of this important on this fourth and final Sunday of Advent, 2015? Because our gospel story from St. Luke recalls for us the response of two heroic women who are asked to put radical trust in what seemed

outrageous promises. First, Elizabeth, who was asked to become a mother in very advanced age and against all odds, and truly to believe that this was God's will rather than a tragic, freak accident. And then Mary, who was asked to accept the most incredible pitch ever to have been put before a young maiden-to welcome a virginal conception from Almighty God and to be the bearer of the Savior of the Universe. And she was just an unknown teenager from Nazareth, which today might be the same as being an ordinary girl from Fridley or Cottage Grove. It would have been reckless and irresponsible for either of them to have trusted the words of promise, unless they came not from a stranger but from a well-known voice. It was the Holy Spirit, whom both of them already knew and recognized, as did their unborn babies. It was the voice of a familiar and loving God, who was not

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caring and communicating with them for the first time that day. It was but the latest and most important of his messages to all of them: The Lord is near! EMMANUEL!

They were not being asked to put faith in an unknown huckster or an alien, self-proclaimed God. They were invited to trust to a loyal friend. And because there was already an intimacy of love in place, that part wasn't so hard. They could risk believing even the most incredible things, because they knew, and were known by, God.

And the same is still true for us. This year, as always, our God announces that peace will prevail over violence, that virtue defeats terror, that fear and hatred are useless, that all shall be safe and well for people of faith, and that God is ever present to us. And this year more than most these promises sound a little too rosy and unreasonable to be taken seriously-sort of like old barren women and virgins being pregnant with new life!

And this year, as in every year, we are invited to trust beyond what seems practical and explainable and natural, and to do that just because we know and love the One who is promising. The Holy Spirit is no stranger. Or if he seems so, then the challenge is ours, not His, to be more open and ready to hear. Where are you and I being called to trust more-not necessarily because it seems reasonable, but because we have faith in the one who is asking? Because he is no stranger?