

SPG#115, Advent 3C

December 17, 2006 – Fr. Charles Pope

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Philippians 4:4-7(8-9)

Luke 3:7-18

For the past two weeks we have been hearing a lot about the coming of Jesus. The emphasis has been on the preparation for his coming. Words such as expectation, anticipation, and hope have been used regularly. And we have read again the prophetic accounts that the Messiah will come, and that no one knows the time or the hour. And we have heard again the cry of John the Baptizer, "prepare the way of the Lord." In today's gospel John announces the coming of the Messiah as he says, **I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.**

The more we hear, the more we remember of Advents and Christmases past, of the other prophets who also foretold. So, in part, in Advent 2006 our waiting and hoping is informed by our memories of what it has been like to wait and hope in the past.

And it seems that the older we get, the more our memories play a part in giving perspective to the present.

I am fond of remembering the Advent and Christmas of 1952 when my mother's larger family consisting of many cousins, aunts, uncles, and her parents all gathered at our house in Nashville, Tennessee for Christmas. I have a picture of all of us on the front porch.

Being in the second grade and one of the short ones, I am in the front row proudly displaying my two cap pistols in their holsters strapped to my waist.

That week in December was something like heaven for me. I got what I wanted gift wise, and a large number of the people who really cared about me were on that front porch in 1952.

And I recall that our family in those years went every Advent to Centennial Park in downtown Nashville where there was a replica of the pagan temple in Athens, Greece called the Parthenon. On the ground in front of that structure every year was a live nativity scene complete with cows, donkeys, sheep, shepherds, wise men, Mary, Joseph, and the Baby. As people sat on the ground watching, carols were played over a sound system. Again, it was a magical moment with my family present with beauty to behold and beauty to hear.

Those are some of my childhood memories. And if we could all turn in our favorite, what a book we could write! A more dispassionate, more critical voice might say, Oh, I see. Your perception of Advent and Christmas is shaped by sitting on the ground in the middle of December looking at animals in front of a replica of a

temple to pagan deities.

But that is not the point is it? Childhood memories are not just memories of precise bits of sterile information. They are memories of the heart as well as of the mind.

For a child, everything is new. Colored lights appear on the streets, in the homes. There are Christmas trees and candles.

There is music playing in the stores and at home on CD players. Life becomes magical. The world becomes new.

In today's epistle from Philippians the Apostle Paul invites us into this new world as he says: **Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.**

I tell you what. Let's pretend. Pretend that on the southern horizon are Mary and Joseph moving towards Bethlehem, towards Christmas at St. Paul's. On the northern horizon are the shepherds, on the east, the wise men. From above the angels are

descending, getting ready to sing. On the western horizon we find John the Baptizer announcing the coming of the Savior.

And we find ourselves. And all of us are converging.

As we all move toward Bethlehem, if we are moving toward a new joy in Christ this year, then we are moving toward a new world. If we have more of a sense of ministry, then it is a new world. If we are able to let go of the busyness and appreciate the magic, then it is a new world.

But for many of us, we have forgotten how to appreciate a new world, a new creation. Many of us adults have forgotten what kids today know, what we knew as kids.

How does one step into this world of softness and gentleness and joy? How does one let go of the busyness and the distractions?

How does one let go of the worries and troubles? How does a whole church step into the new world? How does a whole church become a haven of softness, gentleness, and love.

Well, for one thing we can remember other times when the world was new, when life was magical. We can remember when problem solving and frenetic schedules faded away to the quiet warmth of holy enjoying and holy expecting. And perhaps we could realize that the best preparation in Advent is not something that is forced. Rather it is something that we prevent or allow. And once we allow it to happen, that permission leads to a celebration.

And so as we wait, let the memories come, the good ones, the ones that warm your heart, the ones about magic and closeness, the ones that tell us about the new creation. And hope for the peace that passes all understanding. Amen.