

“Do Not Be Afraid; You Lack Nothing”

*A Homily by Stephen Martz for the people of Holy Innocents & St. Nicholas
31 December 2006*

*Jeremiah 31:15-17 + Psalm 124 + Revelation 21:1-7 +
Mathew 2:13-18*

One of my flaws – there are lots of them, but I’m only telling one today – one of my flaws is that I tend to be too serious. Being a child of an alcoholic family, this probably was inevitable, but over the years I’ve learned to lighten up. One thing I’ve gotten pretty good at is laughing at myself.

This is a virtue I admire in others, too, and so I was delighted this week to come across a story the suffragan bishop of Long Island told about himself.

Many years ago, as a young priest, said Bishop Rodney Michel, he was asked by a funeral director to conduct a graveside service for a homeless man. The cemetery was far out in the country and this man was to be the first person buried in it.

Regrettably, the young priest got lost and arrived an hour late, to find a large hole in the ground, a crew eating lunch, and the hearse, he presumed, long gone. Let’s pick up the story in his own words:

I apologized to the workers for my tardiness and stepped to the side of the open grave, where I saw the vault lid already in place. I assured the workers I would not hold them long, but this was the proper thing to do.

Well, I poured out my heart and soul, and closed the lengthy service with a blessing and walked to my car. I felt I had done my priestly duty for that poor

soul, and that the crew would leave with a renewed sense of purpose and dedication, in spite of my tardiness.

As I was opening the door and taking off my...biretta, I overheard one of the workers saying to another, "I have never seen anything like this before...and I've been putting in septic tanks for 20 years."

This is a day when we need both to laugh and to cry. I know I don't need to tell any sad stories to help many of you cry, but I thought this one might help us all laugh.

We know that pain and loss and grief are an inevitable part of human life, and they are inescapable on this Feast of the Holy Innocents. Without comparing one grief to another, I can say that the bitter weeping of Rachel and all mothers of slaughtered children resonates with the tears many of us feel as we say goodbye to this beautiful building and its precious memories.

But on an even deeper level, the Feast we celebrate today takes us into the heart of our faith. It is eerily contemporary. Day after day we read of horrible violence in Iraq and elsewhere, and it is not hard to imagine some variation of this story occurring somewhere on our globe during the time I am preaching this morning.

The events we hear proclaimed in today's gospel are all too familiar in today's world, and they challenge us: how will we respond?

The readings for today take us into the heart of human depravity and the heart of our faith, depicting terrible acts **and** speaking firmly of hope. *Rachel is weeping*

for her children...because they are no more. Herod commits mass murder because he was infuriated that he had been tricked by the wise men.

And...and nevertheless Jeremiah assures the people that *there is hope for your future* while the reading from Revelation speaks of a time when *death will be no more; when mourning and crying and pain will be no more, when I will be their God and they will be my children.*

And so these readings also challenge us: will we be people stuck in grief, or will we be people of hope, people who hope? How will we respond?

By now, I know all of you well enough to know that you already have chosen the way of hope. Both congregations, formed in part by your buildings, by the rich architectural vision of Ned Dart, are communities of people who hope. And together we will be a people who hope...one bread, one body, one hope.

We are a people of hope because we do not deny the brutal voice of the Herod or his contemporaries; we do not merely historicize the terrible screams of Rachel. We know the reality of cruelty and suffering in our world.

But we also have heard the voice of Jesus, the voice of the Good Shepherd who cares for all innocent victims and who cares for us, who seeks out the lost sheep and lays down his life to protect the sheep he loves and knows by name.

We know his love and we trust his voice. We know the power of his resurrection is stronger than all the voices that speak deceit and hate, violence and death. And so we are people of hope, people who hope.

Sofia Cavalletti, the principal creator of the children's religious education program known as the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, tells a moving story of a severely handicapped Mexican boy of 12 who came to know the Good Shepherd's particular love for him. She writes,

Alfonsito...received a lot of medical care in his family, but very little love. By chance, he happened to be visiting his aunt's home and found the box, closed at the time, of the Good Shepherd material. What was it that urged Alfonsito to place his hand on that box, saying: "Well?"...His aunt told him the parable briefly, for no longer than ten minutes, and then showed him the material.

Alfonsito seized it; he who had so much trouble in coordinating his movements took out one sheep after another, caressed and said to each, "Do not be afraid; you lack nothing."

It was a great effort for him to pronounce the words because he had difficulty with language. His concentration – for him it always had an extremely short span – this time lasted two hours...

Then he went home in a tranquil state, something totally unusual because generally everything became a problem for him; "but," his mother said afterwards, "he kept saying strange words: 'Do not be afraid; you lack nothing'." Two days later the boy returned to his aunt's house; once again he found the box of parable material, put his hand on it, and said "Well?" This time the aunt told him the parable of the sheep that was lost, sought after with love, and found again...

He began to work with the material, fondling each sheep, but this time he said, “I am not afraid; I lack nothing.” Then, almost with a pain at the start because of the enormous difficulty he had in speaking, something like a cry came from him, and in a tone of voice that grew steadily he shouted: “He is for me alone! “He is for me alone! He is for me alone!”

Alfonsito finally had found a love that was for him alone; and this changed his life. He never gave the parable material back to his aunt; he safeguarded it in the small cabinet with his other treasures...From that day on he was heard to sing now and then, and he managed, yet almost without words, to communicate his great secret to his younger brother.

Friends, especially those of you who are hurting, this is our story, our hope, told in a modern parable. When we are hurt, when we are broken, God comes to us in the most unexpected ways. For Alfonsito, God came in a box full of simple figures of sheep, shepherd, and sheepfold.

God will come to you as a shepherd searching out a lost sheep. God is always seeking us out and comforting us, loving us, accepting us -- ...in our pain...in our joy...full of weakness...full of strength – whispering to us, *Do not be afraid; you lack nothing. You are wonderful and I love you just as you are.*

That divine love for each individual sheep, and for all of humankind, transforms us, remakes us -- just as it did Alfonsito – until we find ourselves knowing, loving, and accepting all others as readily as Jesus does.

When joy overflows from the center of our being, we share the love we have found, as Alfonsito so touchingly does with his younger brother. In that moment, we ourselves become good shepherds; become a living gospel, a blessing to the world.

And if, as we carry our blessing out into the world, we happen to bless a septic tank here and there, Jesus will laugh with us and say: just keep on blessing and loving and living.

And do this in remembrance of me.