

Homily – by Deacon Stephen Pitts
Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 17, 2016

The movie *Good Will Hunting* tells the story of a math prodigy, Will Hunting, who works as a janitor at MIT, but is very gifted in mathematics. He lives a very predictable life in south Boston, hanging out frequently with his best friend Chuckie. One day, as the two of them talk at the scrapyard, Will tells Chuckie his dream: that the two of them will buy houses in the same neighborhood, raise their children together, take them to the same little league games, and eventually get buried all on the south side of Boston. In a surprising response, Chuckie strongly disagrees: You have something that none of us have. You're sitting on a winning lottery ticket and afraid to cash it in. The best part of my day, he says, is for about ten seconds, when I come by your house, after I knock on your door. For a split-second I hope that you've left, on to bigger and better things. Will challenges Chuckie in strong language to let go of the fear that keeps from using the gifts that God has given him.

In the gospel this morning, we meet the figure of Joseph, about whom we know very little. Traditionally, he is much older than Mary, perhaps a widower with adult children. I imagine that he was excited about finding a new wife, looking forward to settling down, enjoying his golden years, until one day he finds himself in crisis. Mary is pregnant, and he isn't the father. As the saying goes, a crisis reveals our true character, and Joseph's righteousness emerges: he plans to divorce her quietly, to spare her public embarrassment. Along the way, however, another aspect of Joseph's character emerges: his fear. Joseph wants to manage the crisis himself so he can get his life back to normal and maybe even go find another wife, but God has bigger dreams for him. The word dream is apt, because God literally appears to Joseph in a dream. Do not be afraid. This unexpected, new life is not your doing. It is my doing: more than you could possibly imagine. Joseph is terrified.

If we go back to *Good Will Hunting* for a moment, we find out that Will too is terrified. He is terrified of getting serious with the nice girl that he meets. He is terrified to accept a job that would allow him to develop his mathematical gifts. He is terrified to leave the neighborhood that he knows. But he's very smart, righteous in his own way, good at coming up with reasons, keeping everyone at a distance, doing anything and everything except daring to engage this new life in front of him, something that he did not ask for and that leads him out of his comfort zone.

What of this experience—Will's or Joseph's choice between embracing new life and all of the uncertainty that it brings or running away from it as fast as we can—resonates with us? In this time of Advent, we supposedly pray to open ourselves up to God's new life in unexpected places. But sometimes God actually hears and answers our prayers, many times during crises, and this new life takes us aback, as fear takes hold that keeps us from embracing it. So we keep holding on: to relationships, jobs, ways of seeing the world, ways of relating to people, not because they're particularly life giving but because they are a known quantity. In doing so, I wonder if we effectively give up on new life for ourselves. Even when a crisis emerges that invites us to let go of the security blanket of our routine that helps us feel safe, where do we try to manage it ourselves instead of genuinely approaching God with open hands and an open heart?

I wonder if sometimes we're afraid to ask God the big questions because we know that the answer could possibly demand something of us, and deep down we are afraid of change, even if it could lead to something better. In our first reading today, we hear the Lord God encouraging

King Ahaz of Judeau: ask for a sign. Dare to dream big. And Ahaz flat out won't. Like Will Hunting, he would rather work a job on the night shift as a janitor in MIT than possibly take a teaching job there. What about us? Are we scared to engage in genuine conversation with the Lord, because we are afraid of what the Lord will say to us? Isaiah intercedes to challenge him, just like Chuckie does for Will, do not weary your God. Cut the b.s. we might say. In response, Ahaz receives the famous sign: The virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall name him Emmanuel.

Emmanuel. God-with-us. God is not hanging Joseph out to dry, saying take Mary in but I won't help you out. God is certainly inviting Joseph to something new and different, out of his comfort zone, but at the same time God promises to be with him as he embarks on this new phase of his life. Crises strengthen relationships. This crisis strengthened Joseph's relationship to God, certainly. God might not have ever spoken to Joseph in a dream before, but this dream is just the first of several: A dream to take Mary in. After Jesus is born, a dream to take the Holy Family to Egypt when Herod is trying to kill all of the infants. When the danger is over, a dream to come back to the Holy Land. Then another dream to settle in Galilee. In his later years, Joseph faces perhaps more danger than he has faced in his life, but God also accompanies him in a way that he has never experienced before.

One thing I have heard over and over in many circles these past few weeks is how difficult this past year has been. Where do you feel at the end of your rope, longing for a new beginning? Where might you have lost hope for a new beginning, because you just don't have the energy for it? What might God be offering you, if you would take the risk to ask? Maybe you don't even know where to begin. Here's a start – Irish author John O'Donahue's "Prayer for a New Beginning."

"Prayer for a New Beginning."

John O'Donahue

In out of the way places of the heart
Where your thoughts never think to wander
This beginning has been quietly forming
Waiting until you were ready to emerge.

For a long time it has watched your desire
Feeling the emptiness grow inside you
Noticing how you willed yourself on
Still unable to leave what you had outgrown.

It watched you play
with the seduction of safety
And the grey promises
that sameness whispered.
Heard the waves of turmoil rise and relent
Wondered would you always live like this.

Then the delight,
when your courage kindled.
And you stepped onto new ground.
Your eyes young again
with energy and dream
A path of plenitude opening before you.

Though your destination is not clear.
You can trust the promise of this opening
Unfurl yourself into the grace of beginning.
That is one with your life's desire.

Awaken your spirit to adventure.
Hold nothing back, learn to find ease in risk.
Soon you will be home in a new rhythm
For your soul senses
the world that awaits you.