

My friends in Christ, the Lord tells us today through the Prophet Jeremiah that the days are coming when promises made will be fulfilled. Promises of righteousness and justice...promises of safety and security...promises of peace.

Now, promises made by one who is trustworthy are cause for great hope. And just as God is trustworthy, so what God promises us gives us hope. And to me, it seems that what we, who are the faithful, really *need* right now *is* hope. We need *hope*, yes...*and* we need *joy*. Advent is the season of hope, Christmas the season of joy.

Hope and joy...Advent and Christmas.

I have two nephews and two nieces. And watching them this time of year reminds me of *me* this time of year when I was their age. Your own children and grandchildren – perhaps they remind you of *you* in a similar way. Consider a young child in the month of December, the present awaiting that child under the Christmas tree. That child just *stares* at that present all month long – sometimes even at the expense of personal hygiene and sufficient nourishment – awaiting the blessed hope and the joyful unwrapping of that present at the crack of dawn on Christmas morning.

The present wrapped is hope, and the present now *unwrapped* and *opened* is joy. And it may occur to us that the child is not the only one receiving a gift in that hope that gives way to joy – for the parents, too, and the grandparents, and *all* who are *givers* of gifts – we, *too*, receive a gift: the joy that *we* have when we get to share in the joy of the one to whom we gave that present.

God the Father is the great Giver of gifts, and the greatest gift of all is that of His Son, Jesus Christ; and *we* are the children now, sitting and staring under the decked-out tree, awaiting eagerly in blessed hope for the greatest gift, still “wrapped,” as it were (but not for much longer), in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary. And each year when we receive the Christ Child again at Christmas and so are filled anew with great joy, the Lord shares our joy, that His joy may be in us, and our joy may be complete.

We have considered how the child waiting in hope for the joy of unwrapping that present is an apt reflection of Advent as a season of hope and Christmas as a season of joy. But consider also other gifts that we give and receive and how they, too, are occasions of hope and joy. For example, consider our parish Prayer Board, our Book of Intentions, the Mass intentions that are published in the Sunday bulletin and offered up each day with the daily Mass. Our brothers and sisters in Christ, right here at Saint Peter, are entrusting to us their desperate, heartfelt petitions, pleading with us for our prayers, too, along with theirs, asking us for the gift of our prayers. In their asking us to join in their own prayers, they are, indeed, giving us a great gift: a most blessed opportunity to pray to the Lord on behalf of those in need. And when we *do* pray for these needs...when we receive this gift, this opportunity of lifting our hearts and minds and souls in prayer...then we will find that we give an amazing gift in exchange: the gift of our prayers.

Those who are in need of prayer appeal to us as stewards of God's gift and grace of prayer, for we *are* tasked with the ministry and mission of constant prayer; but they come to us *also* as their beloved brethren in the Lord, asking us simply to give them the gift of our prayer. How, therefore, could we refuse?

Here, now, are just *some* of the *many* prayers that have yet to be answered, as posted on our parish Prayer Board:

[READ ALOUD SOME OF THE PRAYER REQUESTS]

And as I say, these are just *some* of the prayer requests posted on our Prayer Board. I would encourage *all* of us regularly to review the prayer corner out there in the narthex and to pray for the intentions of our brothers and sisters who ask us to join them in prayer; because they are offered in the hope that the Lord will hear and answer them according to His most holy will, and what joy we receive when at last our prayers are answered.

The presents still wrapped under the Christmas tree...the prayers as yet unanswered...there is such great hope represented there, and Advent is the season of hope.

And presents opened...prayers answered...there is amazing joy found there, and Christmas is the season of joy.

And speaking of hope and presents and requests for prayers...I am reminded of something that Father George requested from us – basically his final request at the end of Mass during his last weekend with us. He said that if ever we were a friend to him...we would pray that God bring him home soon. And as we all know, that prayer was answered. And so, in similar fashion, I would like to make a bold request: if ever you would be a friend to *me*...and if you intend to give your priest a gift this year for Christmas, then please, what *I* ask is: go to confession. Go on a pilgrimage to the great chapel of mercy for the Sacrament of Reconciliation – so to receive and thus experience what amazing love and mercy – hope and joy – God wants to give to you in the confessional. This truly is a gift to me as your priest because it invites me to exercise my ministry as your parish priest – to which I was called and for which I was ordained. My waiting in the confessional for penitents is a mini-Advent; I am filled with hope for the opportunity to help wounded souls meet our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. And when they come at last, then my hope is fulfilled and thus becomes joy.

This Advent season, as it happens *every* year in Advent, the Lord gives us hope and joy that His sure and certain promises will be fulfilled. Promises of righteousness and justice, of safety and security, of peace. And the greatest promise of all...the greatest *gift* of all...is Jesus Christ. And so may it be that we await the blessed hope and the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ, the blessed *joy* of Whose coming we soon will celebrate in fullness on Christmas Day, and Who comes to us even *now* in the Eucharist when *we* come forward to receive Him humbly, worthily, and well.