

**R U Joyful; the Lord is coming.**

**Today Luke's gospel presents us with the most joyful image of Advent. In the midst of all the disruption a pregnancy can cast on a young engaged girl, Mary, after challenging Angel Gabriel's message about being the mother of the Lord, joyfully trusts in God and prepares for the coming of the Lord.**

**Mary teaches us that having joy-filled hope is not simple optimism,**

**an irrepressible idealism that will not let itself be defeated by what's negative;**

**nor is hope wishful thinking, a fantasy- daydream that someday our ship will come in;**

**nor is it the ability to look the evening news square in the eye and still conclude, realistically, that there are good reasons to believe everything will turn out well.**

**Hope is not based on whether the evening news is good or bad on a given day. The daily news, as we know, is better on some days and worse on others. If we hope or despair on the basis of whether things seem to be improving or disintegrating in terms of world events, our spirits will go up and down like the stock market. Hope isn't based on CNN, or any other network. Instead, hope looks at the facts, looks at God's**

**promise like Mary did, and then, without denying the facts or turning away from the evening news, lives out a vision of life based upon God's promise, trusting that a benevolent, all-powerful God is still in charge of this world and that is more important than whether or not the news looks good or bad on a given night.**

**Jim Wallis, the founder of Sojourners and one of the prophets of hope in today's world, has a wonderful way of illustrating this:**

**“Politicians, he says, are all of a kind. A politician holds up his finger in the wind, checks which way the wind is blowing, and then votes that way. It generally doesn't help, Wallis says, to change the politicians because those who replace them do exactly the same thing. They too make their decisions according to the wind. And so – “We need to change the wind!” That's hope's task. The wind will change the politicians.**

**How does this work? Wallis uses the example of the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa. Apartheid was not brought down by guns or violence or even by changing the politicians, but by changing the wind. And it was changed by hope. How?**

**In the face of racial injustice, people of faith began to pray**

together and, as a sign of their hope that one day the evil of apartheid would be overcome, they lit candles and placed them in their windows so that their neighbors, the government, and the whole world would see their belief. And their government did see. They passed a law making it illegal, a politically subversive act, to light a candle and put it in your window. It was seen as a crime, as serious as owning and flaunting a gun. The irony of this wasn't missed by the children. At the height of the struggle against apartheid, the children of Soweto had a joke: "Our government," they said, "is afraid of lit candles!"

It had reason to be. Eventually those burning candles, and the prayer and hope behind them, changed the wind in South Africa. Morally shamed by its own people, the government conceded that apartheid was wrong and dismantled it without a war, defeated by hope, brought down by lit candles backed by prayer. Hope had changed the wind.

During the season of advent, Christians are asked to light candles as a sign of hope. Unfortunately this practice, ritualized in the lighting of the candles in the advent wreath, has in recent years been seen too much simply as piety (not that piety doesn't have its own virtues, especially the virtue of nurturing hope inside our children). But lighting a candle in hope is not just a pious, religious act; it's a political act, a subversive one, and a prophetic one, as dangerous as

**brandishing a firearm.**

**To light an advent candle is to say, in the face of all that suggests the contrary, that God is still alive, still Lord of this world, and, because of that, “all will be well, and all will be well, and every manner of being will be well,” irrespective of the evening news.**

*(The majority of this homily comes from Fr. Ron Rolheiser’s commentary on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday readings in the Center for Sunday Liturgy located at the St. Louis University.*

