

I grew up with a beagle, whom my dad very creatively named, Mr. Hound. Mr. Hound was a pretty good dog, affectionate, protective, and always ready for an adventure. As typical for a beagle hound, he was also a born scavenger and supremely stubborn. When you took him for a walk he would normally find some awful bit of garbage, a decaying glove or something entirely unrecognizable except that it smelled, and he would bite onto it like it was the most precious thing in the world. You would have to get down and pry his jaws open to get it to drop out while he was growling and rolling his eyes around. He didn't want to let go of his garbage.

Unfortunately, I am a lot like Mr. Hound. No, I don't pick up bits of garbage from the side of the road, but I am guilty of grasping onto bad habits, hurts, and ways of thinking like letting go would be leaving a part of me behind. Forgiving past hurts, changing well-worn habits, looking at a situation with a new perspective, these things are hard to do.

*“The grace of God has appeared, saving all and training us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age, as we await the blessed hope, the appearance of the glory of our great God and savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to deliver us from all lawlessness and to cleanse for himself a people as his own, eager to do what is good.”*

These words from Saint Paul in the second reading fling wide the great hope that we have in Jesus Christ. All of the past few weeks of Christmas celebration has been to remind us and renew us that Jesus Christ entered into time and history to redeem us. Godless ways and worldly desires are the rotten pieces of garbage that seem to intoxicate us – epitomized by the classic trio of power, sex, and money. Jesus Christ has come to deliver us and to cleanse for himself a people as his own. In other words, we have been made to love and desire greater things than what we might normally grasp onto and hold as precious.

Isaiah chapter 40, which is the first reading today, uses language that describes something new. Indeed, it is the beginning of a whole new part of the Book of Isaiah. The first 39 chapters of Isaiah describe how the people of God are being punished because of their sins, it is a constant reminder of the need to repent. But then the whole language opens up in chapter 40, “Comfort, give comfort to me people, proclaim that her service is at an end; her guilt is expiated.” “The glory of the Lord as been revealed and all people shall see it together.” “Here is your God...like a shepherd he feeds his flock.”

The coming of Jesus Christ opens up the way to leave behind godless ways and worldly desires. Christ opens up the way to new life – a life that includes forgiveness and mercy. He is the good shepherd who can bend down and rip the garbage from our teeth even while we growl.

This last feast of Christmas, the Baptism of the Lord, reveals to us the glory of God. Jesus, in the waters of the Jordan, is called the “beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.” We hear the voice of the Father, are given the sign of the Holy Spirit descending upon Christ, and see the Son in prayer. The Glory of the Trinity is revealed on this day. “Here is your God, here comes with power the Lord God.”

When we are baptized, we are made new in Jesus Christ. He was baptized so that we can be washed from the old ways of godlessness and worldly desires so that we can take part in the hope of eternal life. The glory of God has come to each of us so that we can be renewed.

Yet, each of us still holds onto something undesirable – a sinful habit, resentment, unforgiveness to an individual, fear about the future. Pray, that this year, the goodness of Christ our Savior and the grace of your baptism may bring you further into the freedom of the glory of God.