

**“I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved.”**

*Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo*

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*Third Sunday Advent / Opening of the Holy Door  
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“I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved.” With these words from the Gospel of St. John, Jesus gives us a beautiful and powerful image to help us on our pilgrimage of faith. We have heard him say many times, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” But today, we also hear him tell us, “I am the gate, I am the door.” He is that blessed portal that opens up to us all the grace and mercy of God, and he invites each of us to enter into God’s dwelling place through him.

For this reason, we began our Mass today with a beautiful and ancient ritual: the solemn opening of the Holy Door. When Pope Francis declared this Jubilee Year of Mercy, he reaffirmed the tradition of opening a holy door at St. Peter’s Basilica, and perhaps some of you saw this event earlier this week. But he also asked that a holy door be established in every cathedral and in other churches and shrines of every diocese, so that everyone might have the opportunity to make a pilgrimage and pass through this “Door of Mercy.” Before Mass, we saw the central doors of the church blocked up and closed off, reminding us, sadly, that sin blocks our way to heaven, to God. But that wall was taken down, and the door was opened to show us that Christ can break through any wall, any obstacle, any sin. To pass through the Holy Door means to rediscover the infinite mercy of the Father who welcomes everyone and goes out personally to encounter each of them. It is he who seeks us!

It is through God’s mercy, which we will celebrate and contemplate during this holy year, that we can enter into his presence, freed from the weight and the chains of sin and death. Each of us has burdensome things within our lives; we are all sinners! But we can take heart in the knowledge, the certainty of faith, that God waits for us, just as the loving father waited and watched for the prodigal son. And he not only waits, but he comes to meet us, he makes the first move! This is the whole meaning of Advent - God comes to us in the person of Jesus, his Son. And we watch and wait and prepare for his coming. Through our symbolic opening of the Door of Mercy, and our entering in, we discover once again the abundant mercy of God, which is greater than any sin.

And this is the cause of our joy, knowing that God comes to us with an abundance of mercy. St. Paul says it loudly in his Letter to the Philippians: “Rejoice in the Lord always, I say it again, rejoice! The Lord is near.” Paul was in prison when he wrote those words, and you wouldn’t expect him to be in a particularly joyful mood. But he was! He could be joyful because he knew of the nearness of God, the nearness of his mercy. He could look past the hardship of

his imprisonment and still have a spirit of joy, because he knew that he was not forsaken. He was in the arms of God, who offered him the fullness of grace and mercy. He knew well the words of Zephaniah that we just heard: “Shout for joy, O daughter Zion...The Lord is in your midst, you have no further misfortune to fear.”

Today we open this Holy Door, and we are invited to pass through. But what does this action mean? Certainly we could do this without reflection and go on with our lives as we always have. But Jesus invites us to something more. He invites us to enter more deeply into the mercy he offers. He invites us to a more fervent conversion, to turn our lives more completely to him. He asks us to enter into his dwelling, his kingdom which already takes shape among us here on earth. He asks us to leave behind whatever weighs us down and keeps us from fully belonging to God. Certainly this is what John the Baptist was preaching to the crowds in today’s Gospel: conversion of life and preparation for the coming of the Lord. Concretely, Pope Francis urges us to receive the mercy of God through Confession, through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In this way, we can acknowledge our sinfulness but also rejoice in God’s forgiveness.

The Holy Father also offers a special jubilee indulgence, a remission of the temporal punishment due to sins which have been forgiven. By our pilgrimage through the Door of Mercy, by our confession of sins and our detachment from sin, and by our prayers for the Pope’s intentions and our works of mercy, we can receive this indulgence, this gift of purification. We all can honestly admit that we deserve punishment for our sins, but in his mercy God remits this punishment and helps us to become holy, to be more like his Son.

But this Holy Year is not only an occasion for us to receive mercy; it should also be a time to give mercy as well. Through the corporal and spiritual works of mercy - feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick, forgiving offenses, praying for the living and the dead, and all the rest - we are formed as disciples of Jesus. Through the mercy we show to others, we become more like Jesus, who told us to “be merciful as your Father in heaven is merciful.” Through works of mercy we experience conversion, and our hearts are more prepared for the coming of the Lord. And in mercy there is joy. Those who live the mercy of God share already in the joy of heaven, the joy that Paul preached so fervently.

My dear friends, as we continue this holy season of Advent, and as we begin this holy year of mercy, let us turn to Jesus. As Pope Francis tells us, Jesus is the face of the Father’s mercy. He is mercy incarnate, and he wants nothing more than to embrace us with his grace. As we pass through the Door of Mercy, we can proclaim with St. Paul, “Rejoice in the Lord always, I say it again, rejoice... The Lord is near.”