



**Fourth Sunday in Advent Mass**  
**The Most Reverend Paul J. Swain**  
**Bishop of Sioux Falls**  
**December 17, 2011**  
**Cathedral of St. Joseph**

***With special recognition given to the 100 years of Catholic healthcare provided at Avera McKennan Hospital & University Health Center.***

Today we lit the fourth Advent candle. Our wait for the coming of the Lord is almost over. Seven days remain before Christmas. Will they be seven days of busyness or seven days of prayer and reflection about the only gift that endures?

Our readings set the scene for what is to come, or rather who is to come. St. Paul in the 2<sup>nd</sup> reading speaks of the revelation of the mystery kept secret for long ages: the salvation of all nations and peoples in Christ. The 1<sup>st</sup> reading from the Book of Samuel identifies the Savior's heritage as being of the House of David whose kingdom will endure forever.

And as the annunciation in the Gospel reading sets forth, Mary's faithfulness is essential to God's plan. Some children were asked why Jesus was born in Bethlehem. One raised his hand and said, "Because his mother was there." How innocently true. How essential was her response to the angel and how essential is her presence ever since.

One person wrote that Mary could say yes because she had a "hunch of faith". In her heart she knew that God could be trusted, that the power of the most high would always embrace her even if she, in her humanity, did not always understand. When she asked the legitimate question "how can this be?",<sup>1</sup> the angel spoke the key words of faith: "nothing will be impossible for God."<sup>2</sup> Her response was "I am the handmaid of the Lord,"<sup>3</sup> a declaration that she believed that. Do we?

We too ask the question "how can this be?" when our challenges come. Many are asking that this day with economic uncertainty, political unrest, natural calamities, injustice, heart-wrenching sickness and the emptiness of loved ones gone especially felt this time of year. "How can this be?" is our natural response. But one writer wrote: "when a train goes through a tunnel and it gets dark, you don't throw away your ticket

and jump off. You sit still and trust the engineer” (Corrie Ten Boom). Mary trusted the engineer, the Lord the most high, and so can we.

Like Mary we are invited to incredible things when we allow God to touch our lives in His way. We too need to have a hunch of faith to believe that God the most high will embrace us, that God will give us the strength to meet the challenges we face. The angel said to Mary, “do not be afraid<sup>4</sup>.” Neither need we be afraid.

It is that hunch of faith that has inspired Catholic health care over the years. And so it is a privilege to acknowledge by the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass this the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Catholic health care here in the city of Sioux Falls begun at McKennan Hospital now Avera McKennan Hospital.

It is important to recognize such anniversaries. We do so to honor and remember those who went before in whose legacy we live. They believed like Mary that nothing will be impossible with God. They did not have a business plan, they had faith. We recognize anniversaries also to ponder the history of those 100 years and learn from them. While today is important because this is our time, history tells us that change is ever present, that time moves on, and that we ought to take the longer view. And we recognize anniversaries to remind us of the original mission and to reflect on whether in the midst of the forces of the day we are being true to that mission.

The relationship between the Diocese of Sioux Falls and the hospital has been close over these 100 years, especially in the early days. Mrs. Helen McKennan left \$25,000 in her estate for the establishment of a hospital in Sioux Falls. After several halting attempts, it was Bishop O’Gorman who asked the Presentation Sisters to carry out that intention. He apparently determined the name and he played a key role in its success. He welcomed the first sisters who, with a leap of faith, came to serve beginning with: Mother Agatha Collins and Sisters Magdalene Murphy and Rose McConnell who have been followed by so many. The Bishop of Sioux Falls served as a director of the hospital for many years. The diocesan chancery office was located at the hospital and the chancellor of the diocese, then always a priest, served as chaplain. The Bishops House was nearby until Bishop Brady determined it too run down and so made his residence in the hospital. My guess is that you here are pleased that the bishop is not wandering the halls today. Yet this history is important because that relationship of the diocese and hospital was essential to its formation and development. I believe it is as essential today and in the days to come as we look to the future with hope.

At the dedication of the hospital Bishop O’Gorman, a man of vision as this Cathedral attests, declared that “this hospital is as broad as the spirit of Christ.” The spirit of Christ means being true to His teaching through His church, especially being respectful of all life from natural conception to natural death and the years in between. We are grateful to the doctors, nurses, sisters, priests, lay persons who have over these

years maintained that vision by personal witness and practice assuring that it is the spirit of Christ that permeates all that the healing ministry of McKennan did and does.

Throughout its history there have been challenges including: adequate funding, quality staffing, adjusting to the changing demand in patient needs, and adapting to technological and scientific discoveries. Today there are special challenges resulting from the reduction in number of religious sisters who by their very presence witnessed to the mission. There is also the challenge of the intertwining of private, religious and government entities that can result in mandates in conflict with Church teaching and therefore a threat to religious liberty and the financial stability of the institution. A further challenge is religious indifference in our culture, including among employees in Catholic health care, which encourages weakening ethical and moral standards to address practical problems. These are topics for another day. But as we look to the next 100 years, we need to recognize that the spirit of Christ may need to be defended even at a cost. The tension between health care as a business and health care as a ministry is real and one I hope we can address together.

For today, let us remember with gratitude those who over these 100 years built, maintained and remained McKennan true to the original mission to be as broad as the spirit of Christ. We thank those of you who today embody that mission with great sacrifice and with great love. You, like Mary, are a model of witnessing the full spirit of Christ. The difference between Catholic health care and other institutions is that Christ and His Church are at the center not only in word but in practice.

A little boy was visiting the home of an elderly woman and noticed a wall hanging with the words: God sees me. The woman said to the boy, “some people will tell you that God is watching you to see when you are doing wrong. But every time you see these words, God sees me, I would rather you remember that God loves you so much that He cannot take His eyes off of you. Then you will want to do what pleases Him.” Mary is the model of doing what is pleasing to God. The birth of Jesus is the proof that God loves you that much. It needs to be reflected in Catholic health care and all aspects of our professional and personal lives.

His love is what the Advent candles light our way toward. Come Lord Jesus.

---

<sup>1</sup> – Luke 1:34

<sup>2</sup> – Luke 1:37

<sup>3</sup> – Luke 1:38

<sup>4</sup> – Luke 1:30