

[Readings: Rev. 7:2-4, 9-14; Psalm 24; 1 John 3:1-3; Matt 5:1-12a]

It looks like Halloween is taking over Christmas in terms of home decorations, or at least is giving Christmas a run for its money, literally! Some homes have been decorated for Halloween for almost a month, and, of course, the stores started displaying Halloween decorations and candy in its bins since September. One store where I shopped last summer had everything for the Fourth of July, Halloween and Christmas within its four walls!

The observance in our country of Halloween has morphed into the same kind of celebration of what is called Mardi Gras, Carnival or Fat Tuesday. The “Day Before” has taken over the “Day of.” Very few people remember that Mardi Gras is the prelude to Ash Wednesday and Lent, the season of repentance and reform. Ask 9 out of 10 of your neighbors what the day after Halloween is, and they cannot tell you, because they don’t know. It’s today’s Feast of All Saints.

The costumes worn on Halloween are the wardrobe of fantasy creatures. The people we celebrate today put on Christ. Halloween features characters; the Feast of All Saints features the men, women and children who lived ordinary lives in extraordinary ways, like us. Their day-to-day lives had the attitude of Christ, and were therefore filled with extraordinary grace and blessings.

You and I are living between the day of our baptism and the day of our Funeral Mass. This is the in-between time, the present moment, when the Divine Potter – God – melts us, molds us, shapes us and uses us for His divine purpose, as a potter shapes clay. The potter has a definite design in mind. “What shall I make of this lump of clay?” the Potter asks. If we are pliable, if we allow ourselves to be shaped by God, we become the precious work of art He wants us to be. If we are stubborn, hardened or uncooperative, the Potter smashes us on the wheel and starts all over. When life smashes us, God’s poor but beloved clay, we look to the Potter to help make things right.

In the song, “Abba, Father,” we acknowledge that He is the potter and that we are the clay, the work of His hands. We pray that God molds us and fashions us into the very image of Jesus Christ, His Son.

St. John reminds us in our Second Reading today that even though we sometimes have feet and hearts of clay, we too are sons and daughters of God, His children. So we can call God, "Abba," "Daddy," as well as the Master Potter. We are clay, the work of God's hands.

The Beatitudes which we heard proclaimed in today's Gospel, shows us the method, the "how" of being molded and shaped into God's image and likeness. Realizing our need for God. Being sad with those who are sad. Controlling our ego and pride. Showing mercy. Having only one purpose in life: to know God, to love God, and to serve God. To strive, to celebrate and to serve, as we say in our parish mission statement.

Today's celebration of All Saints is an emphatic reminder that our faith heroes are the people we now honor as saints. Our First Reading from Revelation makes two attempts to give us the number of our "holy heroes." John tells us he "heard the number of those who had been marked by the seal, one hundred and forty-four thousand." My ticket will probably be 144,005! This is not a literal number. This figure is a multiple of a decade, a dozen and a thousand -- numbers signifying completeness -- and is meant to be all-inclusive.

Even if it was to be taken literally, the Roman Catholic Church has officially acknowledged only twelve thousand Saints, Blesseds, Venerables and Servants of God. We still have a way to go! We're only at 8.3%!

Then, to make sure that nobody is left out of the count, John writes that he has a "vision of a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people and tongue." We cannot possibly know all of them. But it is possible and important that we get to know some of them, even those who lived among us and with us in our time and in our place. Who knows, the list might even include you and me one day!

I conclude with a contemporary interpretation of the Beatitudes from "The Message: Catholic/Ecumenical Edition" published two years ago:

When Jesus saw his ministry drawing huge crowds, He climbed up a hillside. The committed and able-bodied climbed up with Him. Arriving at a quiet place, He sat down and taught His climbing companions. This is what he said:

“You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and His rule.

“You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

“You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are -- no more, no less. That’s the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can’t be bought by money.

“You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. He’s food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat.

“You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘care-full,’ you find yourselves cared FOR.

“You’re blessed when you get your inside world – your mind and heart -- put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

“You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.

“You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s kingdom.

“Count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit Me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are getting uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens -- give a cheer, even! For though they don’t like it, I do!

And all heaven applauds” AMEN!

[Readings: Isaiah 25:6, 7-9; Psalm 23; Romans 6:3-9; John 6:37-40]

You and I have been blessed with the gift of the friendship of others. Whether in the distant past, the recent past or in our present moments of life, God has blessed us with men and women, young people and children who have made a difference in our lives. It's all about relationship.

And, as with all good and loving relationships, there are times of feeling distant, misunderstood and lonely. That is the ebb and flow of friendship.

There have been two people in my life in particular, that when we are not together, my heart actually aches to be with them. To share time and space together. To laugh, to appreciate and to love the other in a moment of pure joy and completeness. When I am away from them, my heart aches. When I am less than I should be in loving them, I feel guilt, remorse and pain.

The same happens with our relationship with God. We are longing. There is something in our heart, and in our soul that is empty until it is filled with God.

This is what Purgatory is. It is both a process and a state of being when we are somehow not yet totally enveloped by the love of God, or when we are being purified by it. It is not a process of fire and brimstone, some sort of mini-hell that lasts for a terminable amount of time. Nor is it a process or state where we are tortured by some sadistic God.

It is a process and a state of existence where the souls of all the people who have died before us prepare for their final union with God. The Church teaches that there is also a Hell, a place of eternal punishment and damnation. But Purgatory is a place of faith and hope. The souls of the faithful departed and we are on our way!

Our faith, our hope and our love say that we are somehow connected with our beloved deceased. That although their physical bodies no longer are with us, their spirit, their soul is somehow connected with us just as strongly as the souls of the Saints, which we celebrated yesterday, are connected with us.

The Church has three neat titles for all three groups of souls: The Church Militant, the Church Suffering and the Church Triumphant.

The Church Militant is you and me, and all Christian believers right here, right now. We are trying to fight the good fight in this world against a culture of death with the virtues and the graces God gives us and we develop as we grow in our spiritual lives.

The Church Suffering are the souls in Purgatory, whom we honor, we remember and for whom we pray on this Feast of the Commemoration of all the Faithful Departed, All Souls. The Church Triumphant are those souls now in Heaven, enjoying eternal union with God. It's all about relationships.

What unites all of us are faith, hope, love... and prayer. What is prayer? The classic definition of prayer is "talking to and listening to God, and reflecting on God's presence and actions in our lives."

Could we say that our relationships are like prayer? Talking and listening to each other, and reflecting on their presence and actions in our lives? Prayer is happening right here, right now on earth. It is happening in Purgatory, as the fruits of our prayer for the dead hasten their purification and preparation to be with God totally and eternally. Prayer is happening right now in Heaven, where the saints intercede for us with Mary and Jesus to the Father, in the Holy Spirit.

Prayer is the first component of our lives as Christian stewards. If we do not begin and end our day with prayer, if we do not connect with God before making important decisions or testing a relationship with another, we wander aimlessly and arrogantly and end only in frustration, confusion and loss.

When we put God first in our lives, we realize the fruitfulness of God working powerfully through the Holy Spirit in every moment, every action. Even if it appears to be a failure or leads to a broken heart. We are doing what God wants us to do at that moment.

Did you know that God answers every prayer with one of these four responses: Yes, I'll get right on it. Or, no, it won't be good for you if I did that. God may say, not yet, you have to be patient a little while longer. Or God may say, No, I Have something better in mind for you!

God always hears our prayers, when prayed with gratitude, and responds in the way that is best for us. Prayer is what will get us through this valley of tears as we remember, as we mourn, as we pray and as we hope. That is why we are here this evening. Prayer is what will get God's attention. Prayer is what will unite the Church – Militant, Suffering and Triumphant.

Praying together here, remembering here, tonight, is a very good start. AMEN!

[2 Macc. 7:1-2, 9-14; Psalm 17; 2 Thess. 2:16-3:5, 16-18; Luke 20:27-38]

Why is there no marriage in Heaven? One husband jokingly said, "So we husbands can finally get a little peace and quiet! Of course in the Gospel example, the woman does survive being married to seven husbands! So, you go, girl!

Another question: Do you believe in the resurrection? That's the question that Jesus indirectly poses when He challenges the Sadducees in this Sunday's Gospel reading. As Christians, we believe that someday we will experience a resurrection like Christ's after we depart from this present earthly "age" or stage of life. All believers who follow Jesus will live as the angels do. This is why Catholic Funeral Masses are Resurrection Masses and use white instead of black as the liturgical color.

But do you believe in the resurrection of love? Jesus explained the resurrection in terms of marriage. A marriage is supposed to be a reflection of God's radical love for His people. Marriage is supposed to unite a man and a woman in an enduring love that is the very presence of God. It gives witness to the world that God's faithfulness and commitment to us is real.

So why would Jesus say that marriage is not a part of the resurrection of the dead? Why won't today's marriages become perfect and continue forever after both husband and wife have entered Heaven? Because here on earth, love is imperfectly given and imperfectly received. Therefore, it's constantly dying and being resurrected again, every day, to the extent that each spouse repents and forgives. (The same is true of any friendship.)

Perfect love is God. We live as true children of God when we love our brothers and sisters the way God loves them. Marriage does not exist in heaven because it's an imperfect love: We love our spouses more than we love others. In Heaven, we will love our spouses fully (yes, even our ex-spouses!) and we will love everyone else just as much. And those who have loved us poorly will love us better than the best spouse could love us now. This is what we believe.

Marriage is only an earthly foreshadowing of the divine, faithful, creative love that we will share with everyone in Heaven.

Who has failed to love you enough? Who has caused you pain? How would you feel if that person were to greet you at the entrance of Heaven at the moment of your death? Would you have enough love for that person to get YOU through the door? How is a marriage like God's love? Think of the ways that God loves us, and relate these signs of true love to what you've experienced in good friendships. This a foretaste of Heaven?

How close to the Apocalypse are we this week? Considering that our national presidential election is mere days away, it may feel like we're poised on the brink of a volcano. Remember that we are not voting for personalities; we are voting for platforms and programs. Today's bulletin has the platforms of the two major political parties. Whatever happens on Tuesday, two things remain the same. One is that every citizen of voting age has a moral obligation to vote thoughtfully and prayerfully. The other thing is that whoever our next president may be, we remain "one nation, under God, indivisible." Our unity is our sacred trust as citizens of these *United States*.

Another idea that helps us to back away from the apocalyptic edge is that National Vocation Awareness Week starts today. The American bishops initiated this week in 1976, but it was only shifted to the first week of November in 2014. It's a fateful shift: As we consider who our future leaders should be in government, so too we encourage future leaders for our Church.

Pope Francis uses the term "special consecration" to describe the service of Christ that draws men and women to embrace the roles of priest, deacon, and religious. A consecrated life is the precise opposite of an inconsequential life. For those who feel their lives may be meandering without purpose or focus, a summons to deeply intentional living can be personally life-changing.

The "rule of three" seems to apply when encouraging vocations: When someone hears from three sources that he or she seems right for such special consecration, this sounds the interior bell that invites further exploration.

So don't be shy about being one of those three voices for those who may be awaiting affirmation. And if YOU are the one who has been told three times to consider a vocation to the priesthood or religious life, don't block your ears or your heart!

Apocalyptic doings are on the menu as we creep closer to the end of the Church year. We hear the brutal story of seven tortured sons and their equally valiant mother. Its symbolic meaning is more vital than its historical reliability: Seven sons represent the full complement of the future, all lost in a single day along with their mother. To sacrifice the whole family is to risk the earthly future. Only confidence in the God who transcends history is worth the risk.

Even when all hope seems lost, the future remains because the God of the living rescues us even beyond death. With God, we can weather anything, even the apocalyptic. A sign of such unity is this fact: Today six denominations -- Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Egyptian Copts, Syriacs, and Ethiopians -- celebrate their rites in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem and manage a share of the building.

In the innermost chamber of the site, said to be the tomb of Jesus, a restoration team has peeled away a marble layer for the first time in centuries in an effort to reach what it believes is the original rock surface where Jesus' body was laid. Can you imagine how awesome that discovery is?

It is the centerpiece of one of Christianity's oldest churches and one of its most important shrines.

Resurrection is the cornerstone of the Christian faith because it demonstrates that there is no power greater than God's love. Even death is transformed by that love. While archeological news is always exciting, the faith of Christians worldwide does not depend on the outcome of a scientific investigation, but rather on the lived reality of God's love, present and active in our lives each day.

Live your faith. Live Catholic. Vote Catholic. Die Catholic. AMEN!

[Readings: Malachi 3:19-20a; Psalm 98; 2 Thess 3:7-12; Luke 21:5-19]

It's coming. The end of time. The apocalypse. Judgment Day. That's what our readings point to. Actually, quite soberly, the readings point to the day and the moment when we breathe our last breath. Should we dread it? Should we be fearful? Should we be annoyed? Or should we be overjoyed?

The answer to THAT question is easy. It depends on how deep your faith is. It depends on your relationship with Jesus Christ. It depends on your status with the Church. How you are in these three departments will govern your reaction to the reality of the end of our personal time on earth. As the expression goes, are you ready to "meet your Maker?"

Growing up in Detroit, the four of us kids were sent to bed on the second floor of our home where three bedrooms and a bath were located; Mom and Dad would be downstairs where the living room, dining room and kitchen were. If we were upstairs acting up – "Stop! Mom, Dad! Never mind, we found it!" – We were in trouble and not ready to "meet our Maker" when we would hear Dad walking up the creaky staircase and we spotted the lit end of his cigarette as he turned the corner into our rooms.

When I shared this story in the past, parishioners thought that Dad would then use the lit end of his cigarette to burn us! But that was not true. He usually would just yell at us to go to sleep and then return downstairs. The burning would happen later on when the Devil will do it to some of us!

To the disciples of Jesus, the Temple of Jerusalem was bedrock. Nothing could bring down these walls. The smallest stones in the structure weighed 2 to 3 tons. Many of them weighed 50 tons. The largest existing stone is 12 yards in length and 3 yards high and it weighed hundreds of tons! The stones were so immense that neither mortar nor any other binding material was used between the stones. Their stability was attained by the great weight of the stones. The walls towered over Jerusalem, over 400 feet in one area. Inside the four walls was 45 acres of bedrock which were shaved flat, and during Jesus' day a quarter of a million people could fit comfortably within the structure.

By comparison, the walls of this church go up only about 35 feet, and the buildings that make up our parish plant – the church, the parish center and the rectory, sit only on 10 acres, versus 45 acres for the Temple of Jerusalem.

You can then understand the disciple's surprise. They want to hear more.

Jesus' prediction that a structure so immense would be leveled to the ground seemed impossible. But they pressed Jesus for more information.

In their voice was fear. Fear that their lives were about to change forever. Jesus had not made any predictions like this one. This was different. This, they could understand. Forty years later Jesus' prediction came true. In 70 AD the Temple was destroyed by Rome. Of course, it wasn't much of a stretch for Jesus.

The Gospel of Luke probably was written ten years AFTER the Temple was destroyed! Still, what are we to learn from this prediction and its fulfillment?

The Bedrock of Faith is not in temples. The Bedrock of Faith is not in signs. The Bedrock of Faith is in Christ alone.

History was made this past week. A new President of the United States was elected. I have sensed in people mixed emotions. I have seen on TV the reactions of some, both pro and con the election results. I have seen depressingly negative behavior from our fellow citizens in the aftermath.

How do we live with this knowledge? Some grow cynical about the humanity of the human race. Others succumb to depression, anxiety, or a life circumscribed by fear. We can give up, give in, or behave like the Thessalonians: party hearty today, for tomorrow we die!

Even prophets like Malachi who envision the day of the Lord as a severe hour of reckoning don't throw in the towel on history altogether. After their return from exile and the rebuilding of the Temple, the Israelites have become lukewarm in their faith. Malachi gives them a wake-up call to conversion or else!

Jesus says that the day will come when not one stone of the temple will be left mortared to another, because it will all be torn down. He's reminding us that everything here on earth is temporary.

Goodness will last forever and badness has an expiration date tied to this world. What continues to motivate us in the face of the darkest seasons is the

brilliant light of justice always on the horizon. The only way to get there is to go there. This is no time to give in to the gloom brought on by corrupt leaders – whoever they are -- and destructive decisions. Justice waits on our courage to take the journey toward its “healing rays.”

The presence of evil, Jesus says, leads to our giving testimony: When bad things happen, we’re required to raise our voices. We’re called to answer the lies of our generation with truth. We confront villainy with values. We say no to fear, and yes to courage. This is the aim of next weekend’s Synod 2016 planned by the Archdiocese of Detroit.

So... How deep is your faith? What is your relationship with Jesus Christ? What is your status with the Church? Will we greet His return with fear or with joy? AMEN!

[Readings: 2 Sam 5:1-3; Ps. 122; Col 1:12-20; Luke 23:35-43]

Can you believe that this Thursday is Thanksgiving Day already? I'm still stuck in September. As we gather around the dinner table on Thursday, we will eat turkey or ham and maybe walk on egg shells. We may pass the yams and walk around mine fields. In other words, we may enjoy the holiday as best we can with the people we are with! It is said that at family gatherings, it may be best to avoid topics regarding politics and religion, especially this year!

So it with the Israelites in today's First Reading. Even when Saul, his predecessor was king, it was David who called the shots. The elders of the tribes of Israel knew it was David who really wore the crown and signed the checks. Saul fell on his sword rather than surrender to the Philistines. Saul's three sons were already dead and gone, killed in battle. We would see David "anointed" two other times, by the tribes of Judah and then by those of Israel. He would be the "King of Kings" at least for our Old Testament Hebrew ancestors!

David knew that the king was responsible for two tasks: to lead and to feed. The people are to be fed with the truth; they are to be led into fruitful action energized by the truth. The seeming efficiency of dictatorship is enticing at times to every leader of individuals and groups -- even pastors! But true leadership is a byproduct of true faith. Faith moves one to lead humbly, by example and with love. David had such faith, and despite his faults and failings, he returned to his faith regularly and became the model for all future kings of Judah and Israel.

Contrast this to the false teachers who were emerging in the city of Colossae at the time of St. Paul. The Church's teachings were being targeted by all kinds of heresies and schismatic thought. False teachings threatened to distort the true faith and diminish the role of Jesus Christ as regards our salvation. Paul's words today are both religious prayer and theological correction. Spend some time with them in your private prayer this week. There is so much good stuff there. Suffice it to say that Christ is the "icon," -- the very image of God Himself. We can know God by knowing Christ. Christ is the source from which the Church finds its very being and existence.

Death brings life. Faithfulness in suffering brings true and lasting freedom and peace. Now look at Jesus Himself on the cross. Alone. Abandoned. Naked. Humiliated. From all worldly assessments, one big, fat failure. A loser. And, the Church tells us today, a King. In fact, the NEW King of Kings!

At the moment of His apparent ultimate failure -- death -- someone is hanging around next to Him saying, "I believe in You. I want to live with You when Your Kingdom finally arrives." And Jesus turns to him in love and says, "You will. You will be with me this day in Paradise."

The last time I heard these words, when it was not the Feast of Christ the King OR the observance of Good Friday, was during the funeral homily for Fr. Bohdan Kosicki, former weekend helper here at St. Martin de Porres. He and his pal, Fr. Jack Fabian, owned and ran a religious camp up north in Paradise, Michigan. After the Funeral Mass and luncheon, it was planned that Fr. Fabian would accompany Fr. Kosicki's body back up north. So it was quite fitting and quite clever that Fr. Fabian ended his funeral homily for Fr. Kosicki with these words, "this day, you will be with me in Paradise!"

Two veterans visit the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D. C. With tears in their eyes, they touch the names etched into the black marble: the names of their brothers and sisters with whom they served in Southeast Asia and with whom they were imprisoned by the Viet Cong. As they leave the memorial, one asks the other, "Have you forgiven your captors yet?" "No, never," his friend replies. His buddy pauses for a moment and then says, "Then it seems they still have you in prison, don't they?"

On this last Sunday of the liturgical year, we stand on the edge of Paradise; we look through the Doorway of Heaven. In His promise to the "good thief," Jesus opens the door to true freedom. He invites us to enter Paradise here and now. He has established the reign of God in our time and our place.

All we have to do -- and it is no small thing -- is to put our hurts and slights into perspective. To drop our demand for restitution and vengeance.

To realize our need to be re-created in the love of God.

That our crosses lead us to crowns.

The thief crucified with Jesus Christ recognizes that need in himself and calls out to Jesus. And Jesus, in the very last painful moments of His own life, responds with compassion and hope. In the shadow of the cross, we are able to finally admit our need for healing, for peace, for God. In acknowledging our own need to forgive and to be forgiven, to love and to be loved, to minister and to be ministered to, Christ's promise of Paradise is ours.

Two noteworthy events happen this weekend/today. In Rome, Pope Francis closes the Holy Door at St. Peter's Basilica and the Jubilee Year of Mercy. In Detroit, Archbishop Vigneron is facilitating the first Synod in the Archdiocese of Detroit since 1969. That Synod was looking inward; this Synod is looking outward. This Synod challenges us to figure out how to unleash the Gospel in the public square and in our homes. How to become joyful, missionary disciples with those we know and with those we don't. How to move our parishes from maintenance to mission.

Let's give thanks for on Thursday, Thanksgiving Day. Join us if you can for Mass at 9:30 AM with the special collection envelopes going towards our Christian Service outreach.

Here's an idea. This Thursday, as we gather around in our living room, dining room, family room or restaurant, if we should find ourselves discussing religion or politics, let us do it not with rancor and emotion, but with compassion and with curiosity. Compassion – to speak in respectful tones and volumes. To try to look at the topic from the opposite point of view, and to identify its flaws. And curiosity – to discover why others take the opposite view from us.

Then to move beyond the differences to see what they may have in common, the shared values upon which we can build. To build bridges and not walls. To respect the basic decency of each other as made in the image, the icon, of God. And to enjoy a full and tasty meal in the process! AMEN!

[Readings: Is 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:11-14; Matt. 24:37-44]

Last week, I presided at the funeral of a woman from our parish who was 100 years old. We didn't have to sing "Sto lat" to her, because she was already there! As I prayed before the Funeral Mass, I thought of all the things that she witnessed in her early years, and what she saw in her later years.

In 1916, transportation was by horse and buggy. Communication was by telegraph for long distances and a primitive wall phone for local calls. News was read in newspapers. Handwriting was an art. Fires were put out with buckets of water. Teddy Roosevelt, William Howard Taft and Woodrow Wilson ran for president.

Then I thought of what she might have seen this year. Supersonic planes. Face Book, Twitter and Snap Chat. Google News. Indecipherable handwriting! 30,000 pound fire trucks with aerial ladders. So much progress. But she also heard more about abortions, bullying, addiction, pornography, road rage, noise pollution, global warming. And we had Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton running for president.

Progress generally is a good thing. Once in a while, though, our progress is hampered by setbacks. Obstacles we had not anticipated. Unexpected problems. Confusion, uncertainty and even despair. That's when it's time to go mountain climbing! Now, I don't mean literally. Look at this fine specimen of physical fitness. Mountain climbing? I mean spiritually.

Advent is a time for spiritual mountain climbing. In the time of the prophet Isaiah, the mountain top is where God lived. "The mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest mountain." You cannot get higher than God. You cannot be smarter than God. We go mountain climbing so that God may instruct us in God's ways and that we may walk in God's paths. We walk in the light of the Lord. We emerge from life's shadows and crevices to the splendor and radiance of the summit of God's mountain. There is where we have a sacred encounter with the God of the Universe and the best version of ourselves.

Have you ever had such an experience, a mountain-top experience? Where you encountered God in a profound way? Where Jesus let you know that He was and is near you in your deepest, darkest experiences of life and faith?

This is part of the meaning of the four weeks of Advent. And it is different from the six weeks of Lent. Lent is a time for repentance. Advent is a time for

preparation. How do we prepare? We beat our swords into plowshares, and our spears into pruning hooks. We take our capacity for war and violence and transform it into a means of outreach, dialogue and assistance. As St. Paul says in today's Second Reading: we wake from our spiritual sleep, we throw off those sinful deeds of darkness and put on the armor of Christ.

Today's Gospel passages contains the controversial reference to what some Pentecostals and Fundamentalists call "the Rapture" and what led to the writing of books called the "Left Behind" series. Let me dismantle that inaccurate way of thinking with some concrete examples.

A busload of elementary school students speeds on a highway and skids off the road. Six children are killed; the rest are left behind and walk away with cuts and bruises. 11 years ago, my then 89-year-old parishioner watches her daughter dying of cancer, but not before her son-in-law, the cancer victim's husband and caregiver, collapses first and dies of a massive heart attack. A fifty-five-year-old man also has a heart attack in front of his wife and some of his ten children. They are left behind without a father. The children range in age from mid-20's to eight years old.

This is not proof of "the Rapture;" it is proof of life's random bad things that happen to good or innocent people. Yesterday's reading from the Book of Revelation makes it clear: When Jesus Christ comes at the end of time, there will be nobody "left behind" – they will end up either in the Smoking Section or the Non-Smoking Section of eternity!

The "coming of the Lord" which we anticipate during Lent has two rich meanings of the original Greek word, Parousia. Sounds like "Paris – See Ya!" It can mean the visitation of an important dignitary or politician, or it can mean God visiting a group of people with grace and gifts and salvation. Advent is a time to prepare for the coming of the Lord.

The coming of the Lord at Christmas, at the end of our earthly lives and at the end of the world. When will this happen? Jesus pretends He doesn't know, but He does – He's God! But He warns us: "Stay awake! Be ready, for you do not know at which hour or on which day your Lord will come."

Pope Francis, in his letter on Evangelization, speaks of four steps to “Unleash the Gospel:” welcome, accompaniment, discernment and integration. I would like to focus on each of those words for each of the weeks of Advent. Here are some questions to ask ourselves this first week of Advent regarding welcome:

Do I see myself as a Christian disciple, looking outward? Or do I isolate myself, interacting with only familiar faces?

How can I reach out to strangers? Do I share the Christian faith with others beyond my family?

Am I a person who eagerly supports others? Am I good listener?

Do I model Christian behavior in public and in private?

Do I take advantage of the Church’s sacraments as often as possible?

How does my sense of welcome affect my ability to evangelize?

When did you feel especially welcome in a Catholic Church?

Evangelization starts with welcome. The first step to unleash the Gospel.

Come, Lord Jesus! AMEN!

[Readings: Is 11:1-10; Ps. 72; Rom 15:4-9; Matt 3:1-12]

He's an angel! Isn't she an angel? You're an angel! How and when do we use the word "angel" in our conversation? Looking at a photo of a newborn, a child, a bride on the day of her wedding? To someone who has done a kind thing for us, or who has done a big favor for us? How about when we remember a loved one who has died? In love, we may be ready to gloss over any weaknesses, imperfections and past hurts to realize that the deceased was basically a good and loving person, who did their best with what they had.

Officially, an angel is given the sacred mission to assist, protect and to guide people and all of God's creation. Angels are our very real and constant companions. They are invisible but trustworthy mentors who can inspire and guide us daily. They also communicate to us God's special word for us.

As we consider the four pillars of evangelization given to us by Pope Francis in his pastoral letter on evangelization, today we focus on the pillar of "accompaniment." The journey of faith is never travelled alone. God sends us special people, even pets, to accompany us, to walk with us from the day of our birth to the day of our birth in eternity. So, we look at three groups of people: those who have been our faith companions, how well we are faith companions for others, and who in our lives need the gift of our accompaniment.

It may be fair to say that the first people to accompany us in faith are our parents, or those who served as parents for us. We are blessed by the previous generation of Catholics who were dedicated to handing on their Catholic faith and traditions to us.

If we had the privilege of attending Catholic schools, or Christian Formation and Religious Education, we shared in the legacy of the priests, brothers and sisters of religious congregations who passed on what Isaiah calls in today's First Reading "a spirit of wisdom and understanding, counsel and strength, knowledge and awesome reverence of the Lord."

In our studies in preparation for the celebration of the Sacrament of Confirmation, we also learned a seventh gift of the Holy Spirit – piety. We learned what St. Paul refers to into today's Second Reading: What was written for our instruction, to think in harmony with each other, and to welcome each other for the glory of God.

Throughout our nation next weekend, we will be able to say thank you to

those religious men and women who laid the foundation for our life of piety – living as faithful, committed and conscientious Catholics. We will offer our thanks by praying for all retired religious, maybe by sending them a note of thanks, and by sharing next week in our generous support of the Retirement Fund for Religious. One child describes his religious teachers as “people who knew people, who knew people, who knew Jesus!”

Our best tribute to all retired religious is for you and me to be the same kind of people who think, speak and act as “people who knew people who knew Jesus.” Do I know my Catholic Faith, the teachings and practices of the Church well enough to instruct others? If not, how am I continuing my own faith formation by attending classes, reading and participating in faith-sharing groups?

Am I praying for and being an authentic Catholic witness to those who do not practice the Catholic Faith, or who no longer practice their Catholic Faith? Am I as engaged as I can be in the life of the Church – at home and in my parish? How can I deepen my faith in Jesus Christ and in His Church?

And now, those who are in our lives who need the gift of our accompaniment. What family member, fellow student or co-worker needs me to accompany them at this stage of their life? How can I do it?

What member of my family can I encourage with charity and patience to return to the Church. How? Which of my parents, children, siblings or relatives need to feel a special sense of welcome, and how can I give it to them?

Can I share my own story of who has accompanied me on my journey of faith? Am I praying enough for family members to return to the Church?

Today’s Gospel gives us the “angel” of St. John the Baptist who minces no words about what we are to do to prepare ourselves for the coming of the Lord.

To repent, to produce good fruit. To turn our lives around.

The difference between heavenly angels and earthly angels is that earthly angels are flawed, weak and sometimes sinful. Yet they are still given the sacred mission to assist, protect and to guide people and all of God’s creation. Earthly angels are very real and constant companions. They are trustworthy mentors who can inspire and guide us daily. May we be God’s angels to our families, our parish, our nation, our world. Come, Lord, Jesus! AMEN!

[Readings: Isaiah 35:1-6a, 10; Psalm 146; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11: 2-11]

Whenever St. John the Baptist is referenced in the Gospels, there are two questions asked of him that usually pop up. The first question is: "Are you the one?" The second question is "What are we to do?" It is asked of Jesus by the disciples of John the Baptist in today's Gospel. John has done his duty. He has proclaimed the coming of the Messiah. He has told the crowds what they must do to prepare for his coming: to turn away from sin and to prepare their hearts.

But now John is in jail. He probably can guess what awaits him. He might be doubting if Jesus is the Christ, the Anointed One of God, and so he asks the question in today's Gospel: "Are you the one, or should we look for another?" Jesus answers: "Look at the miracles I have performed. Listen to the message I have preached. Let me into your hearts and into your lives."

As we come to the midway point of our Advent journey, I invite you to ask yourselves those same questions. Do you really believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? Do you really have a personal relationship with Him? And, if so, how are your actions, your attitudes, your speech and your lifestyle reflecting that relationship? "What do you want me to do?" Our Blessed Mother Mary has the ready answer: "Do whatever He tells you." Do what Jesus wants you to do.

That leads us to the third pillar of evangelization given to us by Pope Francis in his apostolic letter, "The Joy of the Gospel" – discernment.

Take a look at your own life. What specifically do you still need to do to prepare the way of the Lord? What is Jesus Christ asking of you today? Only YOU can fill in the blank. Be honest. Be brutal. Be specific.

Religious men and women -- priests, brothers and sisters -- may have played a role in helping us to answer those questions. They served in our parishes. They taught in our schools. They ministered in our hospitals.

Now, most of them are elderly and in need of our response of generosity. For over twenty years, the Retirement Fund for Religious has been collected to help these religious men and women in their later years. What does the Lord want us to do? Easy: to pray for them, to thank them with a note or a card.

Offer financial support to them through our sharing in the Retirement Fund for Religious. This national collection is being taken up this weekend in all parishes. Please give as you prayerfully discern it. In their name, I thank you!

Back to discernment. The word “discernment” means to invite the Holy Spirit, God’s Word and God’s Holy Church to help us to prayerfully figure out the answer to life’s questions, to figure out the answer to what God wants us to do with our lives, and to figure out how to do it! Discernment is an essential quality along the path of Christian discipleship. It is so significant that Pope Francis has named “Discernment” as the theme for the next Synod of Bishops in the year 2018. This synod will focus on how to catechize youth and to help them discern the will of God in today’s complex world. Note here that “youth” refer to people aged 18 to 35. A Pew study concludes that 70% of that generation of youth do not believe in any organized religion, and do not participate in church activities.

Put simply, discernment is the process whereby we attempt to decide what is right or wrong, good or bad, true or false. Often, discernment centers on a particular event, a way of acting or a decision to be made. This can be as simple as helping a child see why it is wrong to lie, to grappling with a complicated moral or ethical matter. Regardless, it focuses on helping someone discern how the Holy Spirit is leading you and me.

In conscience formation, a person has the obligation to do one’s best to develop a well-formed conscience — that is, one formed in light of the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the teachings of the Church, the wisdom of learned or holy people, and the Scriptures. God is the judgment of the individual’s practical reason. Such a decision must be made sincerely, while listening to the movements of the Holy Spirit. There is something I call the Five Finger Prayer of Discernment. It involves eight fingers and two thumbs!

There are five areas of the moral life which must be considered in order to have a well-formed conscience. To forget or to discard any of them is to have only a partially-formed conscience.

One: What does God’s Word say to us? In order to know this, we need to know what the Bible says and what it does not say. Misinterpreting the Bible

makes us Fundamentalists or Literalists, which is wrong thinking and acting; knowing how the Catholic Church interprets the Bible correctly is authentic.

Second: What does the Church say? And what does she not say? Are there people or types of people the Church hates? Never! Are there actions that are considered mortal and venial sins? Always! The easiest resource of Church teaching is the Catholic Catechism of the Church. It was developed and approved by Pope St. John Paul II in the early 1980's. It has a table of contents and an index in the back of the book for easy reference. Every Catholic household should have a Catholic Bible and the CCC. Christmas is coming!

Third: What can we learn from science about our moral or ethical dilemma? Faith and science seek the same truth. When they come together to the same conclusions, we have objective truth, not relative or subjective truth. Science tells us that we are able to do it; ethics tells us if we should do it. We cannot divorce humanity from science.

Fourth: Have other people struggled with the same issue you are struggling with? What did they choose? How did they choose? What were the positive or negative consequences of their choice? We can benefit from their experience. To be locked into just what everyone else is doing leads us to relativism. No objective truth or virtue. Do whatever you want.

Finally, what are the unique circumstances of my situation that may be different from that of others? How will this influence my choice and its consequences? To be locked only into this leads us to situation ethics. I alone determine what is right and wrong.

Then, put these five points into your fingers, put them all together and pray! Then you will have a well-formed conscience. You will authentically be doing what the Lord wants you to do. And you will be ready when He comes... at Christmas, at the end of our earthly lives, and at the end of time. Come, Lord Jesus! AMEN!

[Readings: Isaiah 7:10-14; Psalm 24; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-24]

When I began taking different progressive medicine for the various medical maladies I have inherited over the past ten to fifteen years, the instructions that came with it carried the explanation about why I am taking it, what it will do, and what the possible side effects might be. As usual, as when you listen to TV commercials about prescription medications, the list of side-effects seems almost as bad as the illness itself.

Do you want pain relief or do you want a stomach ache? Do you want the itching to stop, or do you want to lose a layer of your skin? I was very startled and surprised to find out that the anti-inflammation medication for my neuropathy is also prescribed by doctors as an anti-depressant. So, even if I do have pain, hey, I don't care! I'm feelin' GREAT! Another side effect of this medication is "strange dreams." And BOY do I get those once in a while.

Dreams are significant in the Scriptures. Although we are told in the Catholic tradition that dreams are just our mind's way of filtering, recycling and retro-fitting what happens on our conscious level during the day, we do hear that dreams are a way that God can communicate with us, as God does with Joseph.

We often forget about poor Joseph. Every year, we tend to focus on the story of Mary. But this year, it's Joseph. That's why I chose the image of St. Joseph holding the Baby Jesus while Mary is taking a well-deserved nap for the Christmas cards I have sent out to you. Now, if the angel can appear to Mary, and then also appear to Joseph, there's a lesson in that. That means that the angel can appear to you and me, too. In the Bible, the Annunciation does not occur only once, but twice -- not just to a woman, but also to a man.

God doesn't appear as a ghost, as happens with Ebenezer Scrooge in "A Christmas Carol." No, God appears to Joseph as an angel, and speaks in a language and with words which Joseph understands. "Don't be afraid." "Jeshuah, Joshua, Jesus: God saves." "Emmanuel: God is with us." Joseph would hear these words in the Hebrew oral and written tradition of his ancestors.

God IS with us, and God is calling us to something greater than we can

imagine. St. Paul says that we are “called to belong to Jesus Christ.” We are “called to be holy” – called to take that which is human in us and make it divine.

In his papal encyclical, “The Joy of the Gospel,” Pope Francis calls us to welcome, to accompany, to discern, and today, to integrate what we have learned so far to become deliberate disciples. We have been reflecting on this during the Sundays of Advent. But first, a commentary on our readings.

Ahaz in today’s First Reading, originally refuses to acknowledge and accept anything God had spoken through Isaiah, so Isaiah thinks that Ahaz has given up on God. That’s why Isaiah says, “my” God instead of “your” God or “our God.” Ahaz is not being terribly sincere here. Like Ahaz, most of us DO want some sort of sign or indication that God IS calling us. We want to see or hear or feel something that lets us know that God is around. Bottom line: Ahaz doesn’t trust Isaiah.

Maybe God is calling us in our dreams. Maybe God is calling us through the words of the Bible you hear today. Maybe you will realize that GOD IS WITH US when you come up to receive Holy Communion and realize what it truly is for the first time. Take an extra second or two when you come up to receive Holy Communion to think about and to realize what you are doing and Who you are receiving: God with us.

The Bible carries an implicit message that God does appear over and over again, to various sorts of folks. Matthew and Luke both have it right, but they are telling the same story from a different perspective. God continues to come into the world, but sometimes we have to trust other sources as well!

A possible Christmas gift this year is to believe in someone's dreams, even our own. Not the dreams that come to us during our sleep at night, but the dreams we have during the day: what we want to be when we grow up. What we would like to do to better ourselves or the world around us. What we would like to do say to the world in a message of hope, trust and service.

As a Christian believer and as a practicing Catholic, where do you see yourself in your faith journey next year, five years from now, ten years from now?

Another possible Christmas gift is to see where we can welcome others, how we can accompany others in their search for faith, for hope, for love. To help them and us discern what God wants them and us to do with our lives.

During these last Advent days, we pray that when we leave here during these final days of preparation for Christmas, we can be light in the mounting darkness of evil and sin in the world, pointing others to the light by our acts of kindness and our words of peace.

We began this past week by collecting, sorting and giving out almost 1000 Christmas presents large and small to over 65 families, many with disabled children, and to people in group homes in our area. Your generosity proves that the spirit of Christmas is not found in “getting” things, but in “giving” things.

We continue our Christmas preparation today by blessing images of the Christ Child -- the small, vulnerable Baby through whom the salvation of all people has come. We remember that Jesus is “the reason for the season!” He is the Word Made Flesh, the Light that has come into the world.

This year, make your Nativity set the centerpiece of your Christmas decorations. Show your family and show visitors to your home what is most important about Christmas.

The immortal American poet Maya Angelou once said that you can tell a lot about a person by how they handle three things: a rainy day, lost luggage and tangled Christmas lights! As Advent draws to a close, promise yourself to keep your dreams alive, even when life is dreary, when hope seems lost, and when untangling the messes in your life seems impossible.

We are never too old to dream. We are never too young to learn. Make Jesus Christ a part of that dream. Make His Church the place where you learn. God is with us! And God will come to save us from our sins! AMEN!

[Readings: Isaiah 62: 1-5, Acts 13: 16-17, 22-25 / Isaiah 9:1-6; Titus 2:11-14 / Isaiah 62: 11-12, Titus 3: 4-7 / Isaiah 52: 7-10, Hebrews 1: 1-6, Luke 2:1-14]

Merry Christmas! Welcome to all who join us tonight/today: parishioners, those who join us from other parishes and for whom this is their first, second or third Christmas at St. Martin de Porres Parish; to students, Military, first responders and former parishioners who have "come home for Christmas," and to those who are searching for a spiritual home. "Come to the Stable." We hope that you meet Jesus here today. And may we be Jesus Christ for one another when we leave.

Wally was big for his age -- seven years old. Everyone wondered what role the teacher would give him in the annual Christmas play. Especially considering the fact that he was also a slow learner. To everyone's surprise the teacher gave Wally the role of the innkeeper. The boy of course was delighted. After all, all he had to learn was one line: "There is no room in the inn." He had that down in no time. Then came the night for the program. Mary and Joseph entered the stage and walked up to the inn. "Please sir, my wife is not well. Could we have a room for the night?" Wally was ready for his line. He had rehearsed it all night. He began, "there is", and he hesitated. He started over again. "There is..." and again his mind went completely blank.

Everyone was embarrassed for him, but poor Wally just didn't know what to do. Joseph thought he would improvise and started walking away toward the stable on stage left. Seeing him walking away Wally in desperation called out: "Look, there's plenty of room at my house, just come on home with me."

Is there room for Jesus Christ in your life? This is my Christmas question for you. "Will there ever be any room for Jesus Christ? In our hearts, in our families, in our workplaces, in our schools, in our world?"

There was no room for Jesus in the economic world. There was no room for Jesus in the legal realm. There was no room for Jesus even in the realm of the religious order of his time. There was no room for Jesus in the world of politics. Is there room for Jesus Christ in us and within us? That's the meaning of Christmas! Can the Word become flesh in you and in me?

We know that if we truly believe, the Holy Spirit will make you and me signs of light in the darkness, and instruments of hope in the midst of anxiety and distress. Your presence here tonight/today is such a sign of that light and hope.

Throughout these last four weeks of the Advent season, we have been reflecting

on what Pope Francis calls the Four Pillars of Evangelization – the four pillars of proclaiming and living out our faith in Jesus Christ. Those four pillars are welcome, accompaniment, discernment and integration.

Those of you who are visiting tonight/today: Did you feel welcome as you entered this church? Do you see yourself as a Christian, joyful, missionary disciple, looking outward? Or maybe you isolate yourself, interacting with only familiar faces? To those who are regular and active members of our parish: How can you reach out to strangers? Do you share the Christian faith with your family and with others beyond your family? Maybe tonight/today is a good start, as you gather around your holiday table.

At this time of the year, we greet each other with the words, “Merry Christmas,” casually or with warmth, and a host of meanings attend the phrase. We say: *Hope you have fun! Enjoy this gift I’ve brought you. Please sit at our table and share our feasting. Have a safe journey and a lovely time with your family.* In whatever context we utter the phrase, “Merry Christmas” is a wish and a blessing of real, tangible, incarnate life. We *wrap* love in bright paper and top it with a bow. We *bake* love in fragrant kitchens and serve it on longer-than-usual tables. We *find* love with the people who are most important to us. We have intimate conversations we never find time for in any other season of the year. Christmas celebrates our humanity, wonderful enough that God chose to share it.

Religious Sister Pam Smith (*Days of Light and Darkness*) describes Christmas as the “scandal of anti-transcendence.” It’s scandalous because God does what none of us hope to do: God, in the Eternal Word, plunges from omnipotence to powerlessness, from eternity to limitation, from omnipresence to crushing specificity, and from celestial majesty to prickly manger straw. That’s a big comedown for God. God wraps divine love in swaddling clothes and in a baby’s hungry cry. God serves up love to be eaten and drunk at altar tables the world over.

God decrees that divine love can be discovered in coming together with people we love and also with people we don’t love or even know. God is in the word, in the conversation, in the heart of the world and the heart of each one of us. So Merry Christmas indeed! God is in the world, in the flesh. God wants to be known as Emmanuel, God-with-us. Not some God-out-there, but God-right-here. Not a God who receives our prayers from faraway and may or may not reply -- but a God who experiences our loneliness, sweats our fear, hopes for what we hope for, and works through us and with us to bring the future into being. As God’s Kingdom comes, it won’t

be dropped painfully on our heads out of nowhere. God's Kingdom comes as we prepare to receive it, heart by heart by heart.

As the genealogy of Jesus reveals, God draws straight with the crooked lines of real lives. By means of our personal family trees, God is drawing us into the story of world rescue. Look around the holiday table. See where God chooses to act today. Do you model Christian behavior in public and in private?

God sends us special people, even pets, to accompany us, to walk with us from the day of our birth to the day of our birth in eternity. Who are those who have been our faith companions? How well we are faith companions for others?

Who in your lives needs the gift of our accompaniment? Is there someone special who is walking with you in your journey, in your search? That's how it began with the first disciples of Jesus. They wanted to know where Jesus lived. And He simply said to them, "Come and see." It all began with an invitation. An invitation given. An invitation accepted. "Come to the Stable."

We meet each other when we dialogue, when we discuss. Conversation can win hearts and bond relationships. St. Peter Canisius was a 16th Century Catholic theologian and defender of the Faith during the turbulent time of the Protestant Reformation or the Protestant Revolution, depending on your point of view. But he became a friend to the newly-formed Lutheran Church and was declared a doctor of the Church. Speaking of ecumenical and interfaith dialogue, St. Peter said something that would apply to our family discussions and to any controversial discussion: "if our words are harsh and violent, we will not cure the patient, we will make the patient incurable."

We meet Christ in His Word and in the celebration of the sacraments. The next step is to take what we celebrate here and bring it out there. The Word became Flesh and lives among us.

We are to be and to become the living presence of Jesus to others. Who has been Jesus for you? Be sure to thank them, encourage them, and pray for them if they are deceased. Then begin your personal discernment with their help and the Church's.

The word "discernment" means to invite the Holy Spirit, God's Word and God's Holy Church to help us to prayerfully figure out the answer to life's questions, to figure out the answer to what God wants us to do with our lives, and to figure out how to do it!

It is so significant that Pope Francis has named "Discernment" as the theme for the next Synod of Bishops in the year 2018. This synod will focus on how to catechize youth and to help them discern the will of God in today's complex world. Note here that

“youth” refers to people aged 18 to 35. A Pew Research survey concludes that 70% of that generation of youth do not believe in any organized religion, and do not participate in organized church activities.

Show of hands – How many of you are between the ages of 18 and 35?

I am watching you! I am praying for you to “Come to the Stable!” Is there room for Him in the Inn of your hearts and in the Inn of your lives?

We have a special Christmas present for everyone as you leave church today. A book written by Gus Lloyd. It’s his third “Minute in the Church” book, and this one focusses on the Mass: why we do what we do when we assemble here. Be sure to pick up a copy on the way out of church when Mass is over.

I would like to close with, “Lay It in the Manger” written by Lisa Englehardt:

Your heart, your life, your very self, your humble offering...

Come to the Stable and lay it in the manger which holds the Infant King.

Your prayer for peace on earth, that war and hate might cease

Come to the Stable and lay it in the manger where sleeps the Prince of Peace.

Any ache or anguish, your spirit’s darkest night...

Come to the Stable and lay it in the manger where lays the Lord of Light.

New heaven and earth, God and man are once more reconciled...

For laying in the manger is God’s Son, the Savior Child.

Come to the stable. Let Jesus make this a Merry Christmas. AMEN!