

[Numbers 6:22-27; Psalm 76; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:16-21]

As we celebrate today the maternity of Mary, Mary being the Mother of God, we might hearken to a more sentimental “holiday” which is celebrated the second Sunday in May – Mother’s Day. What kind of “Mother’s Day” card would Jesus select for Mary? The first message that comes to mind is “To the Best Mother in the World – Ever!” That would be an understatement!

Jesus would probably “care enough to send the very best” as Hallmark touts. But being both God and man, Jesus might think of writing a personal note inside the card, instead of or in addition to offering a pre-printed one. Something like, “Blessed are you among women.” He might sign it, “With all My love, Jesus, the blessed fruit of your womb.” Perhaps sometime today you can think of what YOU would write inside a Mother’s Day card for Mary for HER Mother’s Day!

Look at the prayers offered at the Mass for today’s Feast. We pray, not TO Mary, but THROUGH Mary. There is a big difference. Mary is not the Fourth Person of the Holy Trinity. She is a totally human being who was filled with grace; the fullness of God is within her, as when the angel Gabriel says, “Hail, full of grace.” The best way we honor Mary is to honor her Son. We address our prayers today to God our Father, asking that we might “profit by the prayers” of Mary. We can assume that when Mary was on earth, she prayed constantly.

Perhaps it was her example of making a holy place in a corner of her modest home that taught Jesus that when He really wanted to pray, He left the noise and the crowds and would go into solitude on a hillside, up a mountain, in a garden. Children learn how to pray by following the example of their parents.

Son of God though He was, Jesus must have relied in His humanity on Mary’s prayers during His public ministry when things got difficult. We can imagine Mary extending her hands over Jesus and singing the words which come from today’s First Reading from the Book of Numbers. It is a familiar blessing first pronounced when the wandering Jews finally made it to the Promised Land.

What a powerful and comforting image it is for us to think of Mary praying this way for us and for all of humanity. From her throne in Heaven, she looks down upon us, her children, and sings her blessing prayer to and for us. She intercedes for us like a good mother pleading to a compassionate Father when we have done wrong, or when we are struggling or when we are in need.

She also teaches us to slow down, to stop, to listen and to think: "Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart." We see Mary's human but faithful response to a puzzling situation. The shepherds rush, then pause, then rush again to spread the Good News. They are reflecting, too.

The Prayer over the Gifts and the Preface for today's Mass speak of "the beginning of our salvation" through Mary and beg that "our salvation will be brought to fulfillment." Without Mary's "Yes" at the Annunciation, that fulfillment would not be possible.

On a day devoted to both Mary and praying for peace, it is striking to think of how much violence Mary was close to. As a betrothed but unwed mother, she faced the possibility of death by stoning. Then she found out that the king wanted her child, along with many others, dead, and conducted genocide to accomplish his goal. Finally, she had to witness the violent death of her son on a cross. Violence and death, though, are not the whole story, then or now. Peace can grow in the ashes of violence, and new life can come out of death. That's what happens in God's way of doing things. Pray for peace today, both for yourself and the world. But don't only pray; do something to help bring peace to conflict.

Today's Second Reading from Galatians is the only time in ALL of St. Paul's letters that he refers to Mary, and even then he doesn't mention her by name! He simply says, Jesus was "born of a woman." But because of this, you and I are re-born through the waters of Baptism. That makes us sons and daughters of God, and heirs to the Kingdom. But God needed a human mother to cooperate in this plan of salvation. God "cared enough" to send us "the very best" in Jesus and Mary. Here is my "Mother's Day" message to Mary:

Thank you, Mary, our Blessed Mother, for being formed in the Scriptures of the Old Testament. For being prepared from the moment of your conception in the womb of Ann, your mother, to become the Mother of our Savior.

May we keep all the things that happen to us by the hand of God and by the realities of life, reflecting on them in our hearts. May we praise and glorify God like those poor but strong shepherds, for all that your Son does for us.

Thank you for being our Blessed and faithful and loving Mother. Bless us as we begin another year of faith, formation, stewardship, evangelization and discipleship in the service of your Son's people. Holy Mary, Mother of God and our Mother, pray for us! AMEN!

[Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72; Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6; Matthew 2:1-12]

I don't know how many of you have made a "pilgrimage" in your lifetime – going on a long journey to a sacred place that is important to one's belief and faith. For some it is Rome or Lourdes or the Holy Land; for others it is Graceland or the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto.

I know that many years ago, when I visited Universal Studios in California, I had to touch the side of one of the three DeLorean cars which were used for the movie trilogy, "Back to the Future." AND I got the autograph of Walter Koenig, who played Chekov on Star Trek. He signed a souvenir clipboard which I used to compose my homilies for the first ten years of my priesthood. He wrote: "Wishing you the best of all worlds... And I'm sure you know which one that is!"

A pilgrimage involves both time and space. It involves traveling from one location to another, generally of some distance, usually over a long period of time. For the pilgrim, the travel time can offer an opportunity for prayer and reflection, and the distance often requires penance and pain of some kind, even if the mode of transportation is convenient, like an airplane.

A pilgrimage can be a time of humor and fun as well, as is recounted in Chaucer's famous Canterbury Tales. If you haven't read them, it's a treat! Pilgrimages have been with us for centuries, even for thousands of years.

In the cold mountainous regions of northern India, travelers warm themselves by placing burning coals in small vessels. With the vessel wrapped in a cloth, travelers can carry their own personal "fire" with them on their way.

Once upon a time, three men were travelling equipped with such vessels on their way to a holy place. One of them saw several pilgrims suffering with the cold, so he took the fire out of his vessel and lit a fire so that all could warm themselves. Everyone survived the cold that night and lived to journey another day. The next evening, as it grew cold and dark, the second man took out the fire in his vessel and lit a torch so that everyone could walk along in safety. At this, the third man scoffed. "You are all fools," he shouted. "You have wasted your fire for the sake of others." In response, the travelers said to him, "Show us *your* fire!" When he broke open his vessel, there was no fire, no light, no warmth – only ashes and dead coals. One person had given warmth with his fire; another had given light. But the one who kept the fire only for himself was, in the end, left in the cold and dark of his own making.

Today's feast of the "epiphany" or "manifestation" of God to all peoples speaks to this little parable: "Show us your fire!" With the birth of Jesus Christ, a fire has been lit of love and compassion, peace and justice for all people. The Feast of the Epiphany shows us that Jesus has made the fire of faith and hope available to all people who seek it, who embrace it, who live it in their daily lives. Through this sharing, the fire of God's peace and love, justice and truth will light the way for all, and warm the cold darkness that keeps us from God, from grace, and from full communion with one another.

Like any fire, that which has been entrusted to us by Jesus must be tended or else it will go out and be extinguished. If the fire is not available for everyone, then it will burn for no one.

The light spoken of in today's First Reading sees Jerusalem as the holy city, the one point of light in an earth covered in darkness. Blessed by God, the light of Jerusalem's holiness will attract all other nations to it. The wealth all these nations will bring with them as tribute will enrich not only the Temple, but all of Israel. The "tribute" means that all nations would be subject to Israel. With the ongoing unrest in the Middle East, it is obvious; this has not yet happened! You can see why Orthodox Jews still believe that the Messiah has not yet come. Jerusalem has not become the gathering place of all nations of the world.

In our Second Reading, St. Paul uses the word "stewardship". Literally, it means "household management." Here it is in the context of the stewardship of God's divinely revealed message which Paul, as a responsible steward and caretaker, hands on to all people: Jew and Gentile alike. There is to be no distinction or exclusion.

Today's Gospel is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah from today's First Reading. It says that a star guides the "magi" – a word from which comes the word "magic." And that might be a part of the "magic" of Christmas: that if we look for that star today, it will guide us where we need to be. God can use any variety of media to serve His divine purpose. What we believers are to keep in mind is not the METHODS used by God, but the MESSAGE God wants to give us. We should not be so preoccupied with the MEANS of communication, that we miss the essence of the MESSAGE.

Pay attention to the first reading on this feast of the Epiphany. We hear in Isaiah, "Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem! Your light has come, the glory of the Lord shines upon you" (Is 60:1). What does it mean to rise up in splendor? To

rise up means to awaken from one's slumber. In the case of Isaiah, it is the slumber of despair. The kingdom of Judah was forcibly removed from their land, the very Temple where the presence of God dwelt.

And now, at last, that presence has returned. Splendor denotes a brilliant luminosity. Splendor means glory! The source of this splendor is not the kingdom of Judah's own excellence. Rather, it is the glory of the Lord that is the light that shines into the darkness of their despair. At last, in a world devoid of meaning, there is hope. It is not a self-generated hope, a phantasm of the deluded. The hope is from the God who is the light of the world.

And He is the light of the world. He is not the light of those who have earned it. He is not the light of a small sect, hidden in a cave. Judah was exiled, Jerusalem was destroyed so that all nations might come to adore this God. That is the glory, that is the light, that is the hope.

On this feast of the Epiphany, this glory shines once more. The Magi, through the wisdom of a star, find their way to a hidden babe. He possesses no power. He shows no glory. And yet, they do homage before the newborn King of Kings, the Lord of Lords. The nations have come to Jesus Christ, dear friends. The glory of God has shone.

And that is what we remember on this feast. Christmas is not the feast of the privileged few who are sanctified. Christmas is the event that opens a new horizon. The glory of the Lord is meant for every man and woman.

And that glory, dear brothers and sisters, it shines. It shines more than any convoluted light source that we could construct.

It is the glory that shines upon the face of the man or woman dying in the COVID ward this Christmas, all alone.

It is the glory that gives hope to the young man or woman, trying to figure out the meaning of their lives.

It is the glory of the Catholic who darkens the door of our church but once or twice a year, on Christmas and on Easter Sunday.

God is light, the light of the nations, the light that shines even now. This no mere metaphor, no pious hope.

The darkness of death, of despair, of hopelessness, will be illuminated and glorified through the light of the Word made Flesh.

God dwells among us. Not apart from the suffering of this world. Right here, right now.

The words of the Scriptures open to us a horizon, a vista of hope that changes everything.

What left is for us to do homage, to bend the knee before Jesus, the one whom all nations come to adore.

What have you learned so far in your pilgrimage of faith? What lessons can you share with us about life and love and faith? With today's feast of the Epiphany, it is the revelation that Jesus became one of us and began His own earthly pilgrimage, for our salvation and for that of all the nations. We need to keep showing each other the fire of our own faith. That is what hope is all about. AMEN!

[Readings: Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7; Isaiah 12:2-6; Acts 10:34-38; Mark 1:7-11]

Whenever I visit the religious education students, and we talk about today's Feast Day of the Baptism of the Lord, the same one question is always asked: Why did Jesus get baptized? He was not born with the stain of Original Sin that needed to be washed away. As a child, a teen and as a grown man, He never committed any actual sins that needed to be forgiven. So, why baptism?

The Holy Spirit inspired me with two letters: B and C. B stands for John the Baptist, who was the "bridge" between the Old Testament writings and prophecies and the New Testament fulfillment of those prophecies in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the "C" which stands for "Chain" – His baptism is the first of many links of a chain, connecting Jesus with all of humanity. The first was His birth, the second was His growing up. Now in His public ministry, He links us in our humanity with His divinity. Speaking of the Lord's baptism...

John, who is the last prophet, the one who initiates a baptism of repentance, baptizes Jesus Christ. The Word made Flesh, the Splendor of the Father, is baptized with a baptism of repentance. In this act, Our Lord places Himself in the space of a sinner. He identifies with the people of Israel, who are called to return to the Lord their God. And yet, as the Gospel of Mark remembers at this moment of apparent weakness, Jesus is proclaimed as the beloved Son of the Father. We are told to listen to Him, to the one proclaimed as Lord in the hidden silence of the desert.

What is the meaning of this baptism? Yes, we are cleansed of original sin. But we are also made adopted sons and daughters of God. As the First Letter of John proclaims, "This is the one who came through water and blood, Jesus Christ, not by water alone, but by water and blood" (1 Jn 5:6).

Christ entered the world through water and blood. Water is purity, an icon of divine life. And yet, blood is an image of the body. Jesus Christ does not come presenting divine life abstracted from the rest of human life. He comes in both water and blood, as divine and human.

As He descends into the waters of baptism, He gives His flesh and blood over to a divine project. The time for Israel's conversion is at hand. It is the conversion that will lead Him to the cross, to the death of the beloved Son who spills water and blood from his side. It will culminate in the Resurrection of the beloved Son, who does not leave behind His humanity but presents it as a fragrant offering to the Father.

Baptism, for us, is immersion into the water and blood of the Son. Yes, we are given divine life, we are bestowed grace. But never apart from the flesh and blood existence to which we are called as men and women and children.

This is why we celebrate Christ's baptism in the Christmas season. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us (cf. Jn 1:14). Redemption now takes place not through escaping the body, but through it.

After all, that's the nature of the sacraments. Christ's Incarnation continues here and now. Sacraments have always been communal events. In one sense, our celebration of the sacraments is like an orchestra or a choir. Every orchestra needs a conductor. Every choir needs a director. But every orchestra needs instruments. Every choir needs voices. That is you folks. This is how we can and must enter every sacramental experience: as full, conscious, and active participants, ready to be conduits for the flow of grace that God is continually pouring out. The celebrant leads, the presider presides, but the members of the community are essential, adding their prayers and intentions to the proceedings, and being commissioned to bring our faith outside the church walls and into the marketplace, into the work place, into the places of learning and, yes, even the places of government. Using another image...

Have you ever heard the expression, "The apple of my eye?" As a kid, I thought it meant that someone had eyes that bugged out like apples. Some children are privileged to know right away they are the apple of their parents' eyes. This phrase "apple of the eye" refers to the dark, reflective part of the eye that acts like a mirror to the viewer.

Literally, the Hebrew translation is "the little man of the eye" That means that your own tiny reflection registered in the eye looks back at you. This occurs

in that beautiful cloak of St. Juan Diego which reveals the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Scientists examining her eyes saw a reflection of the astonished bishop and priest witnessing the miracle of her image on the tilma.

What the phrase suggests is that God watches us so carefully and with such devotion that we are always in His divine eyes. These verses also suggest that we are to keep God's laws as the apple of our eyes. When a voice from Heaven proclaims Jesus to be the beloved Son, the pleasure of God, we understand that Jesus enjoys that premiere place in the sight of God.

Where do YOU hear the voice of God? How do you respond to it?

Jesus enjoys that beloved position because He keeps the divine will in view at all times. It's a reciprocal relationship; each beholds the other with absolute devotion. How do you and I, with so many hills and valleys in our spiritual composition, hope to become in any sense pleasing to God? First of all, we don't have to do anything: We already are the pleasure of God.

If a voice from heaven speaks today over this assembly, it surely declares that WE are beloved children NOW. How does the way you live reflect what you believe -- that you are genuinely and truly loved by God? That God shows no partiality and loves us all equally? That is what both Isaiah in our First Reading and St. Peter in our Second Reading are calling you and me to recognize, to be and to become.

That will come as a great surprise to many who feel unloved or undeserving of love. Of course God's love is not a matter of merit, but of fact. The God of love created us for love, and it is love that holds us in life.

So it's not God's delight in us that's at issue but our response. How do we reply to such devotion? By placing the divine will in the apple of our eye, so that we live and move and have our being in response to God, making His traits our own: generosity, goodness, compassion, kindness, and forgiveness.

Forgiveness is the biggest one. We can forgive any wrong, any sin, any crime, even if we never forget it. By reflecting God's traits in ourselves to others, we fill in the valleys of our omissions with new virtues. We wear down the

mountains of our transgressions with penance and charity aimed at converting our hearts.

This is the answer to all of today's sin, evil and corruption. In our parish, in our Archdiocese, in our homes, in our country, and in our country's capital.

God alone is the source of our salvation, yet we "prepare the way" by straightening out the bends in our character to become better channels of grace. In a real sense, these readings at the end of the Christmas season today bring us back and full circle to the first Sunday of Advent of last month. When you love someone and you see in their eyes the person they imagine you to be, your realized ideal self, you want to become that, quite naturally. That little man or woman, that little child or teen seen in the other's eye, that's you, with a little more refining and cultivating needed. As they sing at the end of the musical, *Les Miserables*: "To love another person is to see the face of God." When we are tempted to pray that other people change, St. Teresa of Calcutta reminds us that we pray to God that God changes US first. AMEN!

[Readings: 1 Samuel 3:3b-10, 19; Ps. 40; 1 Cor 6:13c-15a, 17-20; John 1:35-42]

There are all kinds of calls going on in the readings today -- and all kinds of people who respond in different ways. Sometimes people are being called clearly, sometimes not. In one case God is doing the calling; in another, someone is calling on God's behalf. And in between the callers and receivers are people like you -- intermediaries -- who either act as a clear conduit or as a telephone operator helping customers with a call.

How am I like Samuel? Am I unsure of something in my life right now but unclear on which way God is telling me to go? Besides God's voice, what other "voices" are competing for my attention as I make decisions -- voices that represent the expectations of parish, family, and friends? Voices from my past? Voices of guilt, fear, or selfishness?

Today's scripture passages involve two fateful introductions: First Samuel, a future prophet, meets the one true God whom he will serve his whole life. And then two disciples of John the Baptist have their attention directed toward an obscure local teacher whom their own famed teacher terms "the Lamb of God."

An introduction is not all there is to these encounters. Once an introduction is made, it's up to the parties involved to follow through to real relationship. Though just a boy, Samuel takes direction from the old priest thoughtfully. The voice is strange to him, yet he offers to listen, to pay attention --the technical word here is to obey. Because he's so willing to attend to God the stranger, Samuel will foster a lifelong relationship with God who is Lord, guide, and companion. As a result, Samuel becomes the most effective judge who ever exercised leadership in Israel.

The disciples who depart from John and approach Jesus make the same choice. They ask where this teacher is staying in a bid to join his school wherever it gathers. One of my favorite verses in the Gospel involves a question and an answer: "Rabbi -- where are you staying?" "Come, and you will see." Where is Jesus "staying" in YOUR life? Is He a welcome guest? Are you bold enough, courageous enough to "come and see" what Jesus has in mind for YOU?

Here is follow-up question: Is there a “right time” to be called by God? Yes, there is, and the time is right now! Regardless of who you are, where you’ve been, or where you are going, God calls you in this very moment.

What does it mean to be called by God? It means that God desires to connect personally with each and every one of us and that our whole life is a response to God. We commit ourselves to a life relationship with a person, a family, or a community, do we not? We seek education in order to prepare ourselves for a certain form of service in the world, do we not? We build a career using the gifts and talents we have been given. In our work, at school, in our family, in our relationships. If they lead us toward God, they are of the Holy One. If they lead us away from God, they are of the Evil One. And we freely choose which One we are going to follow and serve!

For no apparent reason, the Apostles in today’s Gospel immediately drop everything and follow Jesus. Almost immediately, they are rewarded for what seems like a haphazard decision. Jesus turns to the two disciples and asks them a question: “What are you looking for?” (Jn 1:38).

This question of Jesus is addressed not just to those two disciples but also to each one of us. To be a human being is to look for something. To look for that something beyond all things that provides us fulfillment.

We can look for something in the market, making money our fulfillment.

We can look for something in nationalism, making security our fulfillment.

But the disciples had their eyes set exclusively on Our Lord. They do not answer His question directly, but they ask Him where he is staying.

Through this question, they tell Jesus what they are looking for. They are looking to dwell with Him. They do not yet know the fullness of what Jesus has to offer. They do not know that He is the Word made flesh. They do not know that He will suffer and die and rise again and ascend into heaven. They do not know that He will be there whenever two or three gather in his name (cf. Mt 18:20). But they know that their fulfillment, what they are looking for, is Jesus.

They want to dwell with Jesus. “What are YOU looking for?”

Today, with all the talk in the Church related to disaffiliation, maybe we have forgotten that what we most offer is not a political platform, a social program or even secure doctrines that enable us to feel safe in a secular world, but the very person of Jesus Christ. The Church must be a space where people may dwell with Jesus. Dioceses and parishes alike continue to hire consultants who tell us how to better advertise ourselves or organize parish staff for effective evangelization. Fair enough. But those two disciples did not follow a man who had developed a great mission statement or use influencers.

They followed Jesus, Who is the answer to the deepest desires of the heart. They followed the Messiah, the Christ, Who had come to announce that the Kingdom of God was at hand. They followed Him, because they hoped that the Lamb of God might be for them the Shepherd of their salvation.

Yes, today the Church is poorer. COVID-19 has emptied the coffers. We are not the Church of 1955 with flourishing educational institutions and political power galore. But we remain the Church of Jesus Christ. What we offer to men and women and to youth and children must be an encounter with Jesus.

In this new year, in 2021, let us as the Church take up a resolution. We must resolve ourselves not just to better strategic planning or a deepened commitment to our mission statement. Rather, we must resolve to offer men and women the one thing — no, the one person — who fulfills the desire of every human heart. Jesus.

If we are to do this, we must spend our time dwelling with Him. After all, it is not just those two disciples who find their fulfillment in the Lord. It is every man and woman, every youth and child, starting with your presence here today.

Let us start our day in prayer, marking our lips with the Sign of the Cross.

Let us speak His name in prayer throughout the day.

Let us delight in the only Name, in the only Person, who can fulfill the human heart. Jesus.

In these and other ways we give our lives to God. There are also smaller but no less significant choices we make day-to-day in response to God's call:

a kind word to a colleague, an opportunity to enjoy the rain, an extra effort to make a good project great. The key is to be open to God's invitation to connect with God here and now. In this way we open ourselves to think, feel, and act from a graced place.

It can be helpful to have a spiritual friend or mentor with whom you can talk about calling and also to read the stories of how others have been called by reading the lives of the saints. Parker Palmer says that a vocation to the single life, the married life, the ordained life, the religious life, doesn't come from our own person willfulness. It comes from listening. I must listen to and reflect upon the experiences of my life and try to understand what it is truly about. Or else my life will never represent anything real in the world, no matter how earnest my expectations.

"Speak Lord, for your servant is listening."

"Glorify the Lord in your body."

"Rabbi, where are you staying?" "Come, and you will see." AMEN!

[Readings: Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Ps. 95; 1 Cor 7:32-35; Mark 1:21-28]

How many of you remember the children's game, "Follow the Leader?" A group of children select who will be their leader. The leader determines what path the children will take along the street or sidewalk or driveway. Whatever the leader does, the children have to follow. Raise their arms and shake their hands, march instead of walk, say something silly instead of just being quiet.

Moses is the leader in much of the Old Testament. Only it isn't up to Moses to decide what the people of Israel are to do, or where their journey is to take them: God tells Moses and then Moses tells the people.

In today's First Reading, Moses is coming to the end of his faith journey. He has successfully and faithfully led them through the desert to the Promised Land. Now, according to God's will, another prophet is to lead them home.

How will that prophet be selected? God alone is the One Who selects and creates a prophet. Moses' successor is promised to come from his own family, calling his own people to repentance. This prophecy is fulfilled: God provides generations of new prophets to succeed the old.

In our Second Reading, St. Paul is not denigrating married life but is endorsing stability. Nor is he implying that married people cannot be devoted to the Lord. On Friday, we buried from our parish Gerry and Joan Kozak, faithful parishioners who celebrated their 65<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary in August, were here last for Mass on December 13<sup>th</sup>, and succumbed to the Corona virus this month on the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup>. At their Funeral Mass, two sons and a grandson gave the most spiritual and scriptural eulogies I ever heard – quoting Scripture, giving witness to their own faith and speaking from a Christian heart. Both Gerry and Joan loved the Lord and gave a lifetime of witness to Him through their vocation of marriage. It shows through their children and grandchildren.

St. Paul speaks in today's Second Reading of the equality of husband and wife, of a mutuality that remains positive and valid, and of the call for both to make the proper priorities. What are the anxieties of your worldly life that keep you from growing in faith and in your faith practice?

We also have to remember that St. Paul writes this letter to the Corinthians thinking that the return of Jesus Christ in glory is imminent – it will be happening soon. If YOU were told that the Lord is coming back for us soon, how would YOU react? What would YOU do differently?

“Immediately” is a word which St. Mark uses a lot in his Gospel. The original Greek text in our Gospel for today says that Jesus enters the synagogue on the Sabbath IMMEDIATELY and begins teaching and healing. Note that unclean spirits recognize Jesus before the clean and the righteous people do!

Pentecost would be a long time coming after the death of prophecy. The Bible gives us almost no record of the time from the fifth to second centuries before the birth of Jesus Christ, some 300 years. Leadership became a pick-up game. And few were listening intently for a word from the Lord.

That’s at least one reason why the people of Capernaum were staggered by the experience they had of Jesus. He commanded unclean spirits successfully. He taught in a way that was not simply scholarly, but rang in their hearts like a tuning fork. The only word they could think of to describe what Jesus did was “authority.” He seemed, frankly, to know God and to speak with divine backing. Israel had not heard a word like that for a long, long time. It was like standing back at the base of Mount Horeb, and this time, not covering their ears.

He wasn’t just Jesus of Nazareth, he was also Jesus, Son of God. His origins were not just a sleepy town in Judea. His origins were in God’s own self. And as the Son of God, Jesus came to liberate us from the unclean spirits that plague us all -- even the unclean spirit that wants to put others down.

What demons are within our hearts, our lives that need to be expelled? Do we believe that Jesus Christ can expel them? Even the best of us harbor within ourselves an unclean spirit or two. “Unclean” simply means not compatible with the holiness of God. This isn’t a condition any of us can afford to be in! Like Jesus Christ, we, His followers, would do well to say what we believe and believe what we say; to do what we believe and believe in what we do. With courage, let us “follow our Leader” – Jesus Christ! AMEN!