

[Numbers 6:22-27; Psalm 67; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:16-21]

Even though we don't know exactly what is ahead as we enter a New Year, here are some redemptive ways we can move forward and fulfill what God has for us.

Enter the New Year free of any spiritual baggage. The first thing is to let go of the baggage of the past. Release your grip upon any old hurts, wounds, or disappointments. They can bring with them the weights of bitterness, resentment, and unforgiveness. These are the things that your soul can not afford to lug around for another year.

The next thing is not to pick up the baggage of the future. God does not want you weighed down with cares, anxiety, and worry. Live each day, moment by moment, in the sufficiency of His grace, and trust Him in all things for tomorrow's needs.

With hands free to receive what God has for you, and in imitation of Mary, the Mother of God, whom we honor today, focus your faith on these five things:

1. BE AVAILABLE:

Like Mary, be a willing vessel available for every day, occasional use, or to be set aside for special occasions by the Lord. The Potter who formed you, knows best how to use you...and when!

2. BE DEPENDENT:

Be aware that you are totally in need of Him to be the One Who has called you to be, what He asks you to be, and to do what He asks you to do. Lean into His life and strength with 100 percent of your heart...that's what thriving branches do when they're in the vine.

3. BE FAITHFUL:

Your faith in the New Year will be rewarded by Him. Seek His approval...live under His smile...stay with it... Choose obedience over sacrifice. He is using you in more ways than you know.

4. *BE GRATEFUL:*

Live in the atmosphere of thankfulness...it's one of the healthiest ways to live.

5. *BE CONFIDENT:*

The Lord knows those who are His. The Lord knows your name, because He calls you by name. You are no stranger to the Lord. God knows every detail of your life, and every need you face. Daily, you have His undivided attention.

He understands where you are coming from -- He knows your intentions, and motivations -- He knows your deepest desires and quietest prayers.

On this Solemn Feast of the Maternity of Mary, I came upon this surprising and inspiring article from Catholic Vote, a Catholic news feed service:

CV NEWS FEED – In the days leading up to Christmas 2021, ABC News' FiveThirtyEight, which reports on politics, science, and sports, tweeted out a call for abortion stories.

“Do you have an abortion story?”

As more states pass restrictions on abortions and the Supreme Court considers a possible overturn of *Roe v Wade*, FiveThirtyEight reporter Amelia Thomason-DeVoe wanted to “document the impact of these shifts... to include the voices of people who have had abortions in the U.S.”

The results were probably not what she expected.

Within hours, the original Tweet thread received thousands of replies. It became an inspiring Christmas testimony to the beauty of life, the courage of parents who choose life, and the joy of children.

Hundreds of mothers and fathers replied to @FiveThirtyEight with stories of their brush with the abortion industry following a special needs diagnosis of their unborn child. Attaching a beautiful portrait of a smiling teenage girl, Sarah tweeted: “At the ultrasound for my 2nd pregnancy we were told our baby had Down Syndrome and her heart was incompatible with life. They encouraged us to end the pregnancy. She’s completely healthy.”

Women who chose to keep their baby in spite of family and cultural pressures to abort also shared photos and stories of their now-thriving children.

Their children also applauded mothers who kept them. Kenneth Landers knows he beat the odds: “Abortion was designed for people like me: low income, brown, fatherless. I’m 30 years old, helping my mother retire, thriving professionally and personally.”

Children whose mothers chose adoption over abortion praised the courage of their birth parents. April wrote: “Birthmothers who choose adoption over abortion are truly the most compassionate, unselfish, loving people.”

Adoptive parents joined the thread to express their deep gratitude to birth parents, acknowledging that they made brave decisions in a society that pressure them to abort. Along with a picture of his two beautiful daughters, Michael Robison tweeted, “I’m raising two amazing children, both rape babies.... Whose families wanted abortion to avoid shame... Instead, they are here bringing hope... how many stories of Hope get sucked out by vacuums & or ended by a pill?!?! [sic]”

FiveThirtyEight’s Christmas call for personal stories of abortions turned into one of the season’s most heartwarming and prolife Twitter events.

Like Mary, the Mother of Jesus, the Lord knows where you are. You are God’s appointed servant. He knows how He has gifted and equipped you. He knows all He will do for you both now and in the future. He didn’t make a mistake regarding His gifts and His call upon your life, and He will never confuse you with someone else. Whenever there’s a need to begin again, it’s important to remember three things: 1. Starting over doesn’t mean you are a failure. 2. Being willing to try again brings new discoveries. 3. Accepting the need to change is often the first step towards success. Enter this New Year with God, and stay under the rest and strength of His Hand...He has chosen the field where He wants you to work and to flourish. Happy New Year! AMEN!

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

When someone hurts us, what do we most want? Healing, or revenge? Reconciliation of the relationship, or the humiliation of the one who caused us harm? Even if we're kind, gentle souls, there might be a tinge of grievance in our injured hearts that seeks some retribution before things can be made right.

In Isaiah's prophecy, we see the once ruined Jerusalem receiving honor upon honor. Her humiliation -- apparent in broken walls, shattered leadership, and a plundered temple since the time of their exile -- is changed to glory. The whole world might be darkened with clouds, but divine light pours over Zion. Though nations once laughed at Israel's destruction, now every nation flows in her direction. The powerful come to Jerusalem, and lay their wealth at her feet. What a vision! "Lord, every nation on earth will adore you!"

It's what you call an epiphany: a manifestation of God's glory. An epiphany shows us familiar things but with a renewed vision. At the time Isaiah is writing, Jerusalem is a wreck of a city. The temple hasn't been rebuilt. The city walls are still smashed. Those who've returned from Babylonian exile are hungry and desperate. They don't see a shining city on this hill at all. Far from it. Isaiah invites them to see a transfigured Jerusalem, to see God's dream for them.

To capture and possess that dream, the people have to let go of the desire to strike back and punish their enemies. They must look beyond division to a time when even their enemies will be allies, and all will live in peace. The down-payment on this dream has already been made: The historian Herodotus claims that magi from Persia read in the stars that a child would be born to create a new empire. That child was Cyrus, who liberated the Jews from Babylon and sent them home to Jerusalem. The restoration of Israel began with Cyrus, predicted by those mysterious magi. And King Cyrus was no saint!

Six hundred years later, the restoration of Israel is completed as other Persian astrologers once more interpret the nighttime sky, announcing a child born to rule. Israel is again trapped under the burden of history, crushed by occupiers, with no hope in sight.

Were they prepared to abandon ways of retribution and vengeance, to receive enemies in peace? Never mind the international implications. Are WE willing to live in the shining city right here, within our own families and communities, in this very city?

“Magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem.” The Magi were “wise men,” Gentile seers who combined astronomy and astrology to divine religious insights from the skies. Here is another example of faith and science informing each other. Naturally the star attracts the magi and leads them to find its meaning. But for them to really find out who Jesus is, they must first learn from the Jewish scripture -- the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem.

While visiting the churches of the City of Rome when I was a student there, I was amazed at how many churches had an intricate mosaic tile on the entrance floor of the 12 zodiac signs set in a circle. I thought, “This looks more like a pagan temple than a church.” But perhaps in this depiction there was an underlying affirmation of the connection between the physical and the Christian world. Pure faith and true science DO inform each other!

We might feel the same discomfort with the story of the Magi. Three pagan astrologers discover a path to the infant Jesus from a star? What this story celebrates, though, is that Christ came in the world to reconcile the physical to the spiritual. In the same way, He came to reconcile all peoples. If they might come to Christ through the stars, so they must.

The Magi symbolize several things: the need for revelation to inform natural knowledge; the Gentiles’ willingness to accept Jesus as the Messiah; and the pilgrimages of religious seekers who set out on long, risky, and uncertain journeys to find the source of their faith.

Why did Herod want the Christ Child dead? Because the little one away in a manger was being called the “King of the Jews,” a title reserved for Herod himself. Anyone contesting that title was a political rival who had to be eliminated. If Herod ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy!

But we find out that it is God, not Rome, who designates the Messiah-

King, and that though He first appears among the Jews, Gentiles also welcome the revelation, the “Epiphany” of their true ruler.

Ponder these questions this week:

The Feast of the Epiphany is about the divine mysteries becoming known.

How does the light of Christ shine in your life?

What “epiphanies” have you had?

How does the world around you reflect the glory of God?

How does what you know through faith complete what you know through the natural world, through science?

How are you a light of hope for others?

Happy Epiphany Sunday! AMEN!

[Readings: Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7; Ps. 29; Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-7; Luke 3:15-16, 21-22]

Sacraments have always been communal events. Luke sets the scene of Jesus' Baptism in our Gospel today by first describing the crowd: "The people were filled with expectation." John the Baptist and Jesus Himself are not mentioned in the first words of today's Gospel: "The people were filled with enthusiasm." Everything we understand about sacraments tells us that it was the presence of the crowd – their energy and anticipation for what was to unfold, the prayers and wonderings held fervently in each heart – that allowed the flow of God's grace to be made manifest in Jesus. Remember those times when Jesus visited villages but could perform no miracles or healing there, because of the lack of faith of the people. In today's passage, there is great expectation.

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 to the proceedings. Thank you for doing that to me. Your presence, participation and prayer all inspire.

The Liturgy last week revealed the mystery of God's plan -- that in Jesus Christ, the Anointed, the Messiah -- all peoples, symbolized by the Magi, have been made "coheirs" to the blessings promised to Israel. This week, we're shown how we claim our inheritance.

Jesus doesn't submit to John's baptism as a sinner in need of purification. He humbles Himself to pass through Jordan's waters in order to lead a new "exodus" -- opening up the Promised Land of Heaven so that all peoples can hear the words pronounced over Jesus today, words once reserved only for Israel and its king: that each of us is a beloved son or daughter of God.

Jesus is the chosen servant Isaiah prophesies in today's First Reading, anointed with the Spirit to make things right and just on earth. God puts His Spirit upon Jesus to make Him "a covenant of the people," – the word "Covenant" is heard in the consecration prayer of the wine at Mass -- the liberator of the captives, the light to the nations. Jesus, in today's alternate Second Reading from the Letter to Titus tells us, is the long- expected One in Israel, "anointed . . . with the Holy Spirit and power."

In our First Reading, Isaiah praises and lifts up the Lord's servant, in Whom He is well pleased and upon Whom He has put His Spirit. But that is also each one of us on the day of our own baptism.

God has formed each one of us, grasps you and me by the hand as a light for the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring spiritual prisoners out of confinement, to be a light those who live in darkness.

Titus lists the benefits of our baptism. God saved us, gave us rebirth and renewal of the Holy Spirit. We are now sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, and heirs in hope of eternal life. Titus then tells us what is expected of us because we have been baptized. To reject godless ways and worldly desires. To live temperately, justly and devoutly in this age. To live in faith, hope and charity.

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 journey, hope to become in any sense pleasing to God? First of all we don't have to earn 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?

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. St. John the Baptist began Advent when he charges us to "Repent and Believe the Good News." The spirit of those words are heard in today's Gospel as we conclude the Christmas Season today. We are reminded that when you love someone and you see in their eyes the person they imagine you to be, your best version of yourself, 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 Miserable*: To love another person is to see the face of God. AMEN!

[Nehemiah 8:2-4a, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 19; 1 Cor. 12:12-30; Luke 1:1-4, 4:14-21]

Back in September of 2019, our Holy Father, Pope Francis, declared the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time as a Day to celebrate, study and disseminate God's Holy Word as it comes to us in our Bible. Our readings, when studied and prayed correctly, give us a sense of Hope. I could speak on today's readings for about a half an hour, but I suspect you would start tuning out after ten minutes!

A new bishop was visiting the parishes in his dioceses. He asked the pastor of a large church: "What is the occupancy of this building?" The pastor replied, "this church SLEEPS 700 people!"

Today's readings focus on HOPE. Stop and consider: What do you hope for these days? The end of the COVID pandemic? Health for an ailing family member? A better job? A change of scenery? A change of heart? Freedom from fear and anxiety? Freedom from a bad habit or addiction?

It's important to know what we're hoping for, and keeping that hope alive. Our hopes define our intentions, our ambitions, and our direction. Hope helps us get where we want most to go. People without hope remain mired in the present -- or worse, in the past.

Today's reading from the Book of Nehemiah describes a somewhat odd scene. Just about the entire Israelite nation had just spent a full morning --apparently with their faces to the ground -- listening to a recitation and interpretation of the book of God's Law. When it's over, it seems they begin to weep, so much so that Ezra and the priests have to remind them that hearing the decrees of God was supposed to be an occasion of rejoicing, not sadness.

Something similar happened on Pentecost Sunday two years ago when the public Mass ban was finally lifted and people came to church for the first time in almost 18 months. People were in tears as they came up to receive Holy Communion for the first time in almost two years!

Perhaps the Israelites were crying because those assembled realized the great challenges and responsibilities that went with being God's chosen people.

It isn't easy following the Ten Commandments and the teachings of the Church, but it does give us an identity, a purpose and a fulfillment which we could not have without God or His Church. It IS possible and it can be joyful!

The people of Galilee in Jesus' time had hopes too. Most of what they hoped for was pretty unlikely, yet they persisted. Just as we gather in church around the table of our great hope, citizens of Nazareth gathered each week in their synagogue to read from their sacred books, to hear God's promises again, and to keep hope alive. Centuries ago, Isaiah had declared God's plan of liberation for Israel. Isaiah foretold this day of freedom to the people in Babylonian exile, and within a generation or two, the exiles did go home.

But not to freedom. They were re-called to moral and religious freedom. First the Persians ruled over them. Then the Greeks. Now it was the Romans who kept them under the thumb of foreign rule, taxed them to pieces, and tempted their young people with foreign ways of thinking and behaving. For six centuries since the time of Isaiah, Israel was an oppressed and broken community. Just like our world and our culture today. Still, they continued to listen to Isaiah's hopeful words about glad tidings and liberty to captives. Only people who lose hope close the book and walk away from old promises.

When Jesus shows up in Nazareth after His initial successes and all the buzz, His old synagogue is glad to welcome Him back. His family is there. So are His neighbors. These people know Joseph's son. They'd be glad to see what other towns have seen in him, a little pizzazz and a wonder or two.

Jesus reads a prophecy of hope -- and then declares it officially fulfilled. In Himself! Very shortly, this familiar crowd of relatives and neighbors are going to try to run Jesus off a cliff. What went wrong? Why did these faithful synagogue-goers let go of hope just at the moment when they might have grasped it? One essential ingredient in the nature of hope is to put it into action. And maybe they were not able or willing to do that. Their spiritual life had not grown enough to handle what was being asked of them.

My friends, the Spirit of the Lord is upon YOU! The Spirit of the Lord has anointed YOU to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, the

recovery of sight to the blind of heart and mind, to help set those with addictions free, to proclaim a time acceptable to the Lord. Find out what part of Christ's body YOU are. Pray and discern how you can use that part of the Body of Christ that you are to become an agent of hope. And do not be sad while you are doing it, for rejoicing in the Lord must be your hope and your strength!

My friends, take time to spread the Good News today: Assure a grieving friend that they will be comforted; remind a loved one in pain that their suffering will be redeemed; muster the courage to ask someone you hurt for forgiveness. Like Jesus, speak and act with confidence. And with joyful hope! AMEN!