

[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; to students and military and former parishioners who have “come home for Christmas,” and to those who are searching for a spiritual home. “May you find all you need in this house.”

Our Christmas gift to each family is Matthew Kelly’s book: *Rediscovering the Saints: 25 Questions that will change your life*. He begins his reflection with the following: Our collective dissatisfaction with the direction of the world leads to the consensus that the world needs changing. And yet, we seem gripped by exasperation and paralyzed by the false belief that we can't do anything about it.

The saints dispel that exasperation and inspire us to bold action. They remind us over and over again: We can change the world. The saints are defiantly role models of encouragement to embrace holiness through rituals and habits that, as Mathew Kelly says, “keep us grounded and focused.” These moments of holiness are “led by the Holy Spirit.” We are capable of so much more than we think. You have no idea what you are capable of. None of us do. God is constantly trying to open our eyes to the amazing possibilities that He has enfolded in our being.

The saints continue this work, encouraging us to explore all our God-given potential, not with speeches but with the example of their lives. When we have the courage to collaborate with God and pursue our truest self, God lights a fire within us that is so bright and warm, it keeps shining long after our days on this earth have come to an end.

The saints are always swirling around us. They're always there whether we recognize them or don't recognize them, whether we're conscious of them or not unconscious about their presence. They're always there, and through our collaboration with God, through our prayer, through our spirituality increases our awareness of all things spiritual.

And we begin to recognize the saints more readily in our lives and the questions they're asking us and any answers that they are bringing to us. They tend to show up at unexpected times in unexpected ways and very often for unexpected reasons, but it's always an incredibly fruitful encounter if I'm open to it, if I'm aware of it, if I'm conscious.

*Rediscover the Saints* provides short reflections on several well and lesser-known saints with a prayer to ponder with each one. Kelly sums it up well in his reflection of St. Anthony of the Desert... "Lord, help us to realize that the saints were ordinary people who made themselves available to you."

We can make the mistake of losing ourselves in imitating the saints – that maybe sounds a little bit contradictory -- but the reality is that the world doesn't need another Mother Teresa, or Francis of Assisi, or Ignatius of Loyola, or Terese of Lisieux. God created one Mother Teresa, and she lived an incredible life striving to become the-best-version-of-herself. And the world doesn't need another Mother Teresa. The world needs YOU!

God's given YOU a very unique mix of needs and talents and desires and hopes and dreams and ambitions. He's put all of that inside of you so that He can draw that out into these amazing possibilities, into these holy moments, into great relationships, and a great journey and a great adventure and a great collaboration with him.

God wants us to stay constantly focused on our collaboration with Him. He wants us to stay constantly focused on becoming the-best-version-of-ourselves through everything that happens in our lives, through everything we do in our lives. He wants us to stay focused on helping other people become the-best-version-of-themselves by creating holy moments--helping people, situations, environments become all they can be, all God created them to be one moment at a time, one holy moment at a time. This is what The Eternal Word did when He came to earth in the form of a baby. God became human so that humans could become God.

The saints always come bearing gifts, and they always know the right gift at the right time. Saints don't "re-gift!" Giving gifts is an art. Being able

to give the right person the right gift at the right time is something that requires a real thoughtfulness, a real awareness, much more than just going out and buying something. The saints, and the gifts of the saints, are obviously much more elevated than anything material, but they always seem to know the right gift at the right time, and they show us what's possible.

Today I invite you to look back on your own life, at the things that have happened in your own life: beautiful things, amazing things, incredible things that have happened in your life, maybe ordinary everyday things -- but ordinary everyday things can be beautiful and incredible and amazing.

As Pope Francis expresses it in *Gaudete et Exsultate (Rejoice and Be Glad)*: "The Christian life is 'joy in the Holy Spirit' (Rom 14:17). ... If we allow the Lord to draw us out of our shell and change our lives.

Christmas, in fact, is not just a finite season of joy, but the place where unending joy becomes possible for all of us.

At Christmas, joy is meant to be planted in us as a seed that can take root and grow and bear fruit. Rather than being just a few weeks each year when we feel joyful, Christmas can -- and should -- be a fresh beginning, a yearly opportunity to enter more deeply into the joy that is our Christian birthright and duty. When the Son of God took up his dwelling among us, he brought joy with him. When Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem more than 2,000 years ago, this weary, sorrowing world witnessed the birth of joy. At last, joy was possible for us again, because we could once again dwell with God as his friends.

And Jesus' birth was an invitation to every human soul to step out of the relative comfort of its own woundedness, poverty and sorrow and to accept the gift of joy. The angels spoke this invitation first to the shepherds, and the same invitation ripples down to every age and extends to every single person in every time and every place.

We have the choice to respond, to step into joy long after the Christmas decorations have returned to the attic for the year. Christ himself, Love Incarnate,

gives us the model: Go out of yourself and encounter the other. Make a gift of yourself, and, at the same time, be ready to receive the gift of the other.

While Christmas is full of joy and celebration, the world is not exempt from sorrow during this season. For many of us, our hurting hearts experience intensified ache as memories flood our minds. Perhaps the memory is of a loved one now gone from us. Maybe the memory haunts as part of a painful past; something we wish could be changed or undone. Pain not only exists from the past, but in the daily present. Discouragement doesn't stop lurking. Disease doesn't stop waging its war. Death doesn't pause for a few days.

No matter what is causing your hurt, allow yourself the opportunity to recognize the struggle you feel during the holiday season.

When Jesus was born, His parents didn't plan a gender reveal party. No one ordered a baby shower cake. Mary, yes, as a mother, prepared for the arrival of her baby. But riding a donkey on a bumpy road for days to get to Bethlehem most likely would have been her LAST wish in her ninth month of pregnancy. The point is: Jesus wasn't born into ideal circumstances. Despite the stable which most of us would deem unsuitable accommodations, the Light of the World made His grand entrance in the form of a little baby. Human flesh held the Son of God and the glory of the night could not be contained. Angels sang their glory to God and hope, true Hope for the world was born!

Regardless of the trials you face during the Christmas season, the gift you need the most is the One who longs to live in your heart. Despite the tough circumstances you're facing, God's plan is the best plan for your life; He loves you too much to think anything otherwise. No matter the ache or the longing, the sorrow or the suffering, the birth of Jesus brought hope and healing to the entire world. For this, we can celebrate with JOY! AMEN!