

[Readings: Is 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7; Psalm 80; 1 Cor. 1:3-9; Mark 13:33-37]

Some of you, especially those of you who were present for my sister Kathy's Funeral Mass a week ago, know that the month of December and the season of Advent which we begin today, is a time of mixed emotions. Over the course of the years, since 1990, I have lost significant people in my life during this time: my Dad, my Mom, my priest mentor, my best parishioner friend from my last parish, my twin sister, and now, my younger sister.

As I prepared for their transition from this life to eternal life, the readings of the Sundays of Advent bore a much deeper meaning and importance in my life. They speak of preparing ourselves – preparing ourselves to meet the Lord in time and in eternity. Watch! Be ready! For you do not know when the Lord will come into your lives and at the end of time.

Our First Reading for the First Sunday of Advent wrestles with the human condition and the place of sin in our lives. It sounds almost as if Isaiah is blaming God for the bad things we do, the evil people we follow, and the loneliness that comes from being separated from God. He doesn't say, "The devil made me do it!" Rather, Isaiah seems to be saying, "God made me do it!" But at the end of the reading, the blame and the guilt are placed where they should be: in our human hearts. In the dangerous free will given to each one of us.

Our Second Reading is a providential one. Because it says what I think of each one of you on my good days of priestly ministry, when each one of you is the best version of yourselves to me and to each other, as Matthew Kelly says: "I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way -- with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge -- God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." Thank you for ministering to me during these days, weeks, months. You do not lack any spiritual gift!

We wait in joyful hope. So begins the new church year, Cycle B, with the season of Advent. The Gospel of Mark will be our text for the next year of Sundays (along with liberal use of John's Gospel next summer, since Mark is so brief). Prepare for themes of identity and secrecy, along with the role of discipleship and how, with Jesus, everything seems to happen "immediately!"

The prophet Isaiah is our premier daily Advent guide for most of the season. We celebrate the patronal feast of our country on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception (December 8, this Friday -- a holy day of obligation), as well as the hemispheric-significant feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe (December 12). Did you know that the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe is at the exact geographic center of the Western Hemisphere? No wonder Our Lady is the Patroness of the America's -- she is the maternal center of our universe!

Once upon a time, a woman came to see her parish priest, telling him that she wanted to talk about the terrible difficulties her family was facing. Between her tears and her thick accent, she was not easy to understand. It was 20 minutes nonstop before she took a breath. And in that time, she had spoken almost entirely about herself. When she mentioned her husband's lack of work, the drinking of her son's wife, and the infidelity of her daughter's boyfriend, it was only to emphasize to her pastor how bad she must be living her life for God to be punishing her with all these problems.

The pastor told her gently that the God she was describing was not his God. God doesn't punish others to get back at us. God uses us, with all our imperfections, to bring divine love to those in need. This is the hopeful message of the Advent season we are beginning. We are the work of God's hands. So, we need to watch and be ready for the opportunity to be the tool to bring God's peace and presence to others in their difficult time. The pastor assured her that even though she may not feel ready, God needed HER to bring her family healing. God would give her, with all her imperfections, whatever she needed. God would keep her firm. The decision to act and help was hers to make. The decision to act and to help is ours as well. Come, Lord Jesus! AMEN!

[Readings: Genesis 3:9-15, 20; Psalm 98; Eph. 1:3-6, 11-12; Luke 1:26-38]

There have been many block-buster movies that came out last summer. I didn't get a chance to see any of them, but one of them caught my eye – Wonder Woman. She is a DC comic book character who has been around for 76 years.

For a long time, the story of her origin remained the same: her mother formed her out of clay and she was brought to life by the Greek gods, but over the years, that story changed to reveal that Zeus, the king of all the Greek gods, was her father. Wonder Woman's superpowers were a result of her blessings from the gods, including superhuman strength from Demeter (goddess of the Earth) and super speed from Hermes (god of Messengers).

She became the princess of the Amazons, and the goddess of war, and was seen as the first comic character created to be a modern, liberated woman. She was one of the original members of the Justice League of America.

Today, Catholics throughout the world recognize and acknowledge our own, "Wonder Woman" – The Blessed Virgin Mary. She was conceived and formed not out of clay, but in the regular, natural way by her parents, known traditionally as St. Joachim and St. Anne. Her "super power," which we recall today, was that because of her unique role as the future Mother of Jesus Christ, Mary was preserved from all stain of Original Sin, and would commit no sin in her earthly life. Like all of us, Mary would be redeemed by her Son, as all of humanity would be through the life, passion, death and Resurrection of Jesus.

But how could Mary be redeemed if she committed no sin? The great theologian, John Dun Scotus, speaks of "curative redemption" and "preventive redemption." The redemption you and I share in is called "curative." We have sinned. We are sickened. Jesus heals us. Mary is, if you will, "walked around" original sin and actual sin, and so is "prevented" from sinning by God's favor. He uses the example of a child walking towards a deep hole. In one case, he falls in the hole and is rescued and saved by his parent. In the other case, the parent guides the child so that he doesn't fall into the hole. Having been spared of all sin, Mary becomes a powerful intercessor for all of us who have.

Mary's powers are not superhuman, they are supernatural. Her strength is in her prayerful intercession for us to her Son, and her speed is when she comes to our aid whenever we call upon her help. As always, like a good Mother, Mary knows better what we need than we do. So does Jesus. That is why the answer to our prayers and pleas are, "Sure!" "No." "Not yet." "I have something better in mind for you." The same answers wise parents give their children. Jesus and Mary form not the Justice League, but the Redeem Team!

Two great dedications are happening today, in Washington, D. C. and here at St. Martin de Porres. The Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., known as "America's Catholic Church," will see the end of major construction by the end of this year, nearly 100 years after its cornerstone was laid. Final work is being done on the structure's central Trinity Dome, a 20,000-square-foot area over the center of the church, which will bear an image of the Blessed Trinity and the Immaculate Conception.

Archbishop Cardinal Daniel Wuerl said the dome's 14 million tiles are "a faith lesson in art." He explained: "The mosaic depicts the Most Holy Trinity, the object and source of our faith, together with Mary the Immaculate Conception, the model of our faith, surrounded by a great procession of saints who have an association with America and who reflect the face of the Church with its diversity of peoples, traditions and backgrounds. The mosaic is an image of the very mission of the shrine where the many cultural and ethnic traditions that are an integral part of the Church in our country have found a place to express and celebrate their Marian devotions."

The second dedication is that of our newest image of Mary to grace our church. This is a gift from the Active Christian Women's Club to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the apparitions of Our Lady to the three shepherd children in Fatima, Portugal. One of the requests of Our Lady was to promote devotion to her Immaculate Heart. This image of Mary hopes to do just that.

Shortly after my arrival as pastor here at St. Martin de Porres, every time I looked at the wall with the image of the Divine Mercy, I thought to myself, "Something needs to be to His right. Some religious image needs to be framed

and placed next to the Divine Mercy image. The empty space is begging to be filled.” I took it to prayer and asked the Lord to give me direction.

The answer came: the Immaculate Heart of Mary. I proposed this to the ACWC and to the Worship Commission and we poured over various pictures of the Immaculate Heart. This one was selected because this image has the most serene and loving face. The Mary in this image looks Mediterranean with darker skin features. Brown eyes instead of blue would have worked, but there were none with that eye color. Remember, Jesus and Mary came from the Middle East, not from Western Europe or the Scandinavian countries! One parishioner told me that her best image of Jesus is a man with blond hair and blue eyes. I called Him, “Surfer Dude Jesus!”

It is fitting that we bless and dedicate this image on the feast of the Immaculate Conception. God asks of us what God asked of Mary. God wants us to move out of comfort zones and do something or become something that we have not planned on. Like Mary, to say “yes” to an unplanned or unchartered future. Like Mary, we need to act with courage and believe that, when we leap, God will provide the net. Mary considered the challenge and then responded with her “yes” because she trusted God. We can do no less.

O, Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee.
AMEN!

[Readings: Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11; Psalm 85; 2 Peter 3:8-14; Mark 1:1-8]

Some words never grow old or die. A story, a song or even a prophecy can continue to give life and hope as it is proclaimed over and over again in new circumstances. The comforting words of Isaiah in today's First Reading were beautiful music to the ears of the exiles in Babylon. God was no longer angry with them – their exile was coming to an end. God was going to show His power in a dramatic way that would be apparent to all.

A sort of celestial "Corps of Engineers" was called upon to fill in valleys, level hills, and make everything a wide and level highway for the Lord to lead the exiles back from Babylon to Jerusalem.

The words were also music to the ears of the people of Judea several hundred years later. The Jewish people were still an oppressed people – only their oppressors had changed. This time it was the Romans, and the people strained at the yoke of a new kind of slavery and longed for deliverance and freedom. John the Baptist is a voice crying in the wilderness, and Isaiah's words find a second life on John's lips as he baptizes in the Jordan River and frantically strives to prepare the people for the coming of the Lord.

John wants to stir their hearts, raise their hopes and expectations – and even throw in a little old-fashioned fear to hammer home the point that the time is short – the world-altering event is already on the horizon. Just as the exiles in Babylon, so now the people in the time of Jesus firmly believe that their own situation and the world in general had become so mired in sin, chaos and injustice that only God could put things right.

And now us, in our time.

Prepare the way of the Lord! What is barren in your life? What is dry and empty? Bring to mind the sins you've done that dried up what should be fruitful. What part of your journey of faith has been difficult? Bring to mind the sins that have been stumbling blocks or pits or ruts in the road. Then get to the Sacrament of Reconciliation to find healing and hope. Nine priests will be here this Friday evening at 7:00 PM for our vicariate penance service. Prepare!

St. Peter had to deal with the reality of answering the Ultimate Question: When is Jesus coming back? And should we be afraid? St. Peter does use fantastic imagery in our Second Reading to stress the Last Judgment of God at the end of the world. He also says that we should be vigilant if for no other reason than the fear of condemnation.

Many years ago, I saw two different bumper stickers on the back of a car: "Jesus is coming... Look busy!" and "Jesus is coming, and boy is He ticked off!" But St. Peter doesn't leave us twisting in the wind. He exhorts us to be blameless, to live faithfully, and to put the needs of others ahead of our own. That is the positive incentive to do what is good.

Am I feeling led by God? How patient am I? In my waiting, do I remain faithful? What am I waiting for? What will "the thief" take away? My complacency? My illusions about myself? The fantasy world I live in? What will remain? Faith? Where do I go to prepare for the coming of Christ? A place of busyness? A place of emptiness? Where do I best meet God?

This weekend is the annual collection for the Retirement Fund for Religious. Many communities of religious men and women worked for years proclaiming the Good News through education, medicine and social justice ministries and services. They received little or no pay, just room and board in some cases. Now, in their old age and retirement, they have no income or savings to pay for their care. Religious brothers and sisters in their 80's and 90's continue to work if they can to support those who cannot.

Our own Sr. Pat Whalen is a "young kid" in her community at age 70. There are a dozen Dominican senior Sisters living in our community who still volunteer in parish ministries. I was taught by Dominican Sisters in grade school, and Jesuit priests in the seminary. I was friends with Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, now all gone to their eternal reward. A living, walking saint among us, Sr. Mary Finn, still teaches at the seminary. She is a professed religious sister for over 70 years, like our own Sr. Noreen O'Connell, who is 90 this year. Let us show our appreciation for these prophetic men and women who pointed the way to the Lamb of God and who taught us patient and humble service by supporting the Retirement Fund for Religious with our prayers and with our financial support. Envelopes are at the sides of our new offertory basket boxes. "Come, Lord Jesus!" AMEN!

[Isaiah 62:1-5; Psalm 89; Acts 13:16-17, 22-25; Luke 2:10-11]

Perhaps no word is more used – and abused – during the Christmas season than the little word PEACE. Over and over again we hear it in the lyrics of Christmas carols. We send and receive cards that proclaim it in a thousand different shapes and phrases. We wish it to our relatives and friends. The Mass texts of this feast and this season are filled with the word, peace.

One of my e-mail friends passed this on to me, and I share it with you:

“I am passing this on to you because it definitely works, and we could all use a little more calmness in our lives. By following simple advice heard on the Dr. Phil show, you too can find inner peace. Dr. Phil proclaimed, 'The way to achieve inner peace is to finish all the things you have started and have never finished.' So, I looked around my house to see all the things I started and hadn't finished, and by the end of the day, I had finished off a bottle of White Zinfandel, a bottle of Tequila, a package of Oreos, the remainder of my old Prozac prescription, the rest of the cheesecake, some Doritos, and a box of chocolates. You have no idea how peaceful I feel right now!”

We must realize that there are different types or levels of personal peace. There is bodily peace, a certain physical contentment such as we experience after a delicious Christmas Eve or Christmas Day meal. Ah, Wigilia!

There is emotional peace or relational peace, a certain mental satisfaction that we have done a job well or that someone really cares about us, even loves us. These types of peace are very good and very necessary for us. But sometimes, even this kind of peace can often quickly come and go.

There is another, deeper type of peace, the peace the angels promised to the shepherds that first Christmas. The peace that God promises to His people. This is an inner, spiritual peace that neither suffering nor adversity, nor poverty, nor loneliness can take from us. Only one thing can rob us of it: sin.

We have among us in our assembly people who have lost their jobs or may lose their jobs. People who have lost or will soon lose their homes. People who have recently lost a loved one because of death, separation or divorce. Perhaps a recent graduate whose job prospects in this state look bleak, or the person serving in the military who just received marching orders.

There may be someone who is all alone this Christmas, and who seeks to find a sense of family here in the midst of our Christmas celebration.

On the material level, on the emotional level, it may be easy for us to feel “forsaken” and “desolate” – and it is precisely why we need you here with us at this time. To you I give a special welcome and a remembrance in my prayers.

One of the reasons many of us do not have that peace of Christ is because our relationship with Jesus just might be like that person lying in their bed in the middle of the night

who hears a strange noise elsewhere in the house. Is it a burglar? Is it that old furnace? Is it the house settling?

We know that some presence is there, but we do not know who or what it is. Such it may be with our relationship with Jesus Christ. Unknown. Untried.

Someone decided to make their annual retreat at Christmas time at the nearby monastery. Having had a wonderful spiritual experience, they were leaving the monastery to head home, suitcase in hand. They passed one of the monks on the way to the parking lot. "Merry Christmas!" they eagerly said to the monk. "May Christ be born in you," came the reply from the monk.

"May Christ be born in you." Wouldn't that be a wonderful way to say to one another, "Merry Christmas?" "May Christ be born in you?"

As we grapple with the fears within our hearts and with the fear around us, we need to be ever-more sensitive to the voice of the Holy Spirit trying to calm us from within, assuring us that not only will we survive, but that through this, we will indeed grow closer to God as we give up any false pride or illusive desire for total control in our lives. And, most importantly, we come here to be nourished in Word and Sacrament. This is the only place where this can happen. And it happens here every Sunday. At every Mass. God comes to us tonight so that we can come to Him. He becomes one like us, so that we can become like God.

Please accept as a gift from your parishioners Matthew Kelly's latest book, "Perfectly Yourself." May this help you in your relationship with Jesus Christ.

This is my Christmas Prayer for you this night:

"May the peace of God and the freshness of the Holy Spirit rest in your thoughts,
rule in your dreams tonight, and conquer all your fears.

May God manifest himself today in ways you have never experienced.

May your joys be fulfilled, your dreams be closer, and your prayers be answered.

I pray that faith enters a new height for you; I pray for peace, healing, health,
happiness, prosperity, joy, true and undying love for God."

"Today in the city of David a savior has been born for you, who is Christ and Lord.

And this will be a sign for you:"

PEACE! May Christ be born in you! Merry Christmas! AMEN!

[2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16; Psalm 89; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38]

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas! And many of us either want to celebrate it right now, or we want it over with right now! Some of us are still preparing for it. This Fourth Sunday of Advent is our "last hurrah!"

In our First Reading from the Second Book of Samuel, David wants to build an appropriate house for God, a beautiful temple. It is to be a splendid place for the people to worship God, housed at the time in the Ark of the Covenant and protected by a humble tent. But God has something to say about that. After all, didn't God make the entire cosmos and all that dwells within it? Didn't God provide David with his kingdom and all the people in it? In fact, God is actually the maker of David's "house" or family, which is OUR house and family too, along with all the people of the world.

Nathan, David's court prophet, tells David to "go for it," but David's plans would be subject to God's revision. God had other plans. David's plans, however well-intentioned, were rejected. Why? Because God is free, dynamic and independent. A God who journeys, bivouacs, comes and goes and is never confined to one space. Unlike the lowercase gods, this God needs no temple, desires no temple, and approves no temple. This doesn't stop Solomon, David's son from going ahead and doing it anyway.

Do you know what the sad irony is about this? After the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 AD, only the Western Wall of the temple foundation remains and the Ark of the Covenant disappeared, never to be found again... That is until Indiana Jones finds it in the movie, "Raiders of the Lost Ark." Then, at the end of the movie, the U. S. government Powers That Be go and bury it in some obscure warehouse. And all of God's people said, "OY!"

But there is a sequel to the story. One that tells us that not only can God not be contained in a place or a thing, but that God can be found in an actual human being. Thus, the Gospel passage we hear today: The Annunciation.

Mary was only 14 or 15 years old, the typical age of a girl in the Middle East to be betrothed, or engaged in probably a pre-arranged marriage. Her parents were so inconsequential that the Holy Scriptures do not even give us their names. Only later tradition would call them Joachim and Ann. There was no honor, no status, and no greatness here.

The very idea that God could live inside of a human being is revolutionary! A human tabernacle for the Son of God? “How can this be?” We have the answer from the angel Gabriel, “nothing will be impossible for God.”

Does not God also invite you and me into something awesome and majestic? Does God not also make extravagant promises to us about blessing and eternal life? It happens every time we come to Holy Communion.

Mary, the Small and Meek, encounters her God, the Great and Terrible, and just like that, becomes the mother of God’s child. And what is her response? “Okay.” That’s all. And that’s everything. She said “Okay” to a scandalous pregnancy, a difficult birth in a barn, the perils of her Son’s childhood, and the rejection of her home as He sets out to change the world. She says “Okay” in her embrace of His broken, lifeless body after a shameful death. Who says that Mary is irrelevant, that we cannot relate to her? We don’t expect angels to deliver messages to us from God, but we can still learn from Mary’s example.

In what ways do I try to put God in a “box”? A safe and contained place where I know I can always find God? Where does God choose to dwell in my parish or community? In what “house” does God want me to dwell? Do I welcome God into the life I live and into my home? When do I feel most certain God dwells in me? How can I imitate Mary’s response to God?

As we put our finishing touches on our Christmas decorating and other preparations, take some time to be still, to be silent. To let your house be quiet. Read again these three Scripture readings. Listen to the PROMISE God makes to each one of us, the BLESSING that St. Paul shares with us, and the HOPE that Mary gives us. Do not be afraid, “for you have found favor with God.”

“Okay!” Come, Lord Jesus! AMEN!

[Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 98; Heb. 1:1-6; Luke 2:1-14]

Merry Christmas! Welcome to all who join us tonight/today: parishioners, especially 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 and military and former parishioners who have “come home for Christmas,” and to those who are searching for a spiritual home. We hope you will find it here.

Once upon a time, someone decided to make their annual retreat at Christmas time at the nearby monastery. Having had a wonderful spiritual experience, they were leaving the monastery to head home, suitcase in hand. They passed one of the monks on the way to the parking lot. “Merry Christmas!” they eagerly said to the monk.

“May Christ be born in you,” came the reply from the monk.

“May Christ be born in you.” Wouldn’t that be a wonderful way to say to one another, “Merry Christmas?” “May Christ be born in you?”

Has Christ been born in you? The answer to that question will make or break your Christmas celebration.

The very purpose of our gathering is to adore our God because we recognize the mystery of God's love. It is because we recognize and understand that we are able to fall to our knees before this manifestation of God's love. Think about that night when he was born. The inn was full of people, yet none of them came to see the child. The town was full of activity and yet none of them saw the angels, witnessed a star or wondered why this group of shepherds were leaving their flocks behind to come and see a child. Their blindness to what was happening prevented them from adoring the new born king. So the question arises for us, are we too blind to see? Have we come to adore because we recognize the mystery? May Christ be born in you.

Each Christmas for us brings us back to a simple scene where we come face to face with a poor family, a little child and the mystery of divine love. God could have chosen to manifest Christ as a full grown man with no known origin, but rather Christ is given to us as a child in a humble situation, one that is approachable and without pretense. Why? Because God wants us to draw near without hesitation and to be absorbed into his profound love for us. It is not God who seeks to push us away but to draw us in. It is God who has given us the greatest gift wrapped in swaddling clothes and laying in a manger.

It is the one and almighty God who came to encounter us so that we could encounter Him. Is there any greater gift of humble love than what is manifest in today's mystery? How can we be untouched, unmoved by this love? In the same way the rest of the people of Bethlehem were that day. They too were absorbed not in mystery, but in the daily struggles of life. They too were consumed with their own needs and failed to see what was around them. Like the people of Bethlehem over 2000 years ago we can get so wrapped up in the stuff of life that we fail to see what is the point of life. May Christ be born in you.

Was the Son of God really born so that we can encounter in a profound way the presence of God Himself? If we say yes, then we have to ask ourselves; how often do we come to adore Him? Do we, like the shepherds leave all things behind to rejoice in this mystery? The shepherds did go back to their flocks and continued to live their lives, but they took time out to adore the King of Kings and so should we. We should pause each and every week from our lives to adore and be renewed by the mystery of God's presence in and around us.

Look around you in the world and see if we are at peace without Jesus, the Prince of Peace. Look around you and see if there is good will towards others and how can there be if we do not have the Author of all that is good in our lives? Look around and see if there is true love and how can there be if we do not have the Source of love within us? This Christmas can be different if we all take the time to kneel before the manger scene not because others are doing it, but because we look at it as if for the first time in our lives and see something more than just a poor family surrounded by animals, but a family with Christ at the center of it. May Christ be born in you.

This is my Christmas Prayer for you.

“May the peace of God and the freshness of the Holy Spirit rest in your thoughts, rule in your dreams tonight, and conquer all your fears.

May God manifest himself today in ways you have never experienced.

May your joys be fulfilled, your dreams be closer, and your prayers be answered.

I pray that faith enters a new height for you; I pray for peace, healing, health, happiness, prosperity, joy, true and undying love for God.”

“And the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us.”

Merry Christmas! And “may Christ be born in you this day!” AMEN!