

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

Both political and economic theories presume that planning for the future is a good. A business should have a surplus of funds, saving up for a rainy day. A nation should regularly think through various scenarios related to armed conflict. One should be prepared for the worst, just in case it happens.

Christianity shares something in common with both political and economic theories. We Christians also see the merit in planning ahead, of developing a vigilant attitude toward the future. We have a sober view of life, the seriousness through which everything should be taken.

But unlike the politician or economist, we don't believe that good policy or theory will save us. For we're awaiting the Advent of Our Lord, keeping vigil for the coming of Jesus Christ.

The politician and economist believe falsely that their political or economic system will last forever. They don't see that every system, every nation will end. Christ is coming to judge the nations. And that includes our nation, our system, even our economy!

The First Sunday of Advent begins by awakening the Christian to the final judgment of the Word made flesh.

We're not the first people to long for the end. Israel hears in today's reading from the Book of Isaiah of the hope of peace. Every nation shall come to the mountain of the Lord. This unity will not be established through the sword or any human technology. It is the Lord alone who makes possible this unity.

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 for us 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 out of the darkness and into 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? I have been blessed to have had three such experiences in my younger years. 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. These words are inscribed in the main lobby of the United Nations Building in New York City. The challenge is to take our capacity for war and violence and transform it into a means of outreach, dialogue and assistance, as Pope Francis reminded us during his recent pilgrimage to Japan.

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.

Relying entirely on God, keeping vigil, is no easy task. As we hear in the Gospel of Matthew, we creatures tend to get used to things staying the same. We eat and drink. We get married and bear children. The world, after all, will last forever, right? Sure, there's a God. But not a God who would ever bring a conclusion to a cycle of progress and profit.

But as Jesus preaches to us in today's Gospel, there is an end. We won't know when the end comes. But it's coming. The Son of Man will come to judge the nations and guess what! That's us.

For this reason, Christian preparation is different than that of the politician or the economist. When Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem, the end of the

world began. The economic and political cycles are meaningless before the son of David, the son of Mary, the son of God.

The irony of beginning Advent with apocalyptic fire is that Christmas has become part of the very political and economic cycles that Christ has come to interrupt. Gifts to buy. Trees to deck. Parties to hold.

But our Gospel should terrify us! In the middle of our mid-winter carnival, as we delight in our parties with co-workers, families and friends, the Lord may come. And he will come in judgment. What the Pentecostals and some Baptists call “the Rapture” and those who are “Left Behind.” Those called above go to Heaven; those “left behind” get incinerated for all eternity in Hell.

We Christians, therefore, must prepare in another way. Advent remains a season of preparing for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

The “coming of the Lord” which we anticipate during Advent 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.

We pray in this season because we long for Jesus Christ to enter our hearts. We give from our financial blessings because Jesus Christ is present in the poor, entering our lives each day, and to support the work of the Church. We prepare because we long to desire God alone.

Advent is the season to prepare to perceive the coming of our Christ, to recognize His Advent in our midst. He will come to judge the nations; He will come to judge us.

Our task: recognize His presence even now in our midst.

That’s the vigil of the Christian.

So stay awake. COME, LORD JESUS! AMEN!

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

Three years ago, Pope Francis wrote a pastoral letter on evangelization, *Evangelii Gaudium*, “The Joy of the Gospel,” a favorite topic of Pope Francis. One of the four pillars of evangelization which he outlines is the pillar of “accompaniment.” The journey of faith is never travelled alone. God sends us special people, 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 Faith 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. To grow in holiness. We learned what St. Paul refers to in 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 today, 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 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, either in person or on line?

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 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.

An angel is defined as a messenger, sent by God to deliver God’s message, God’s Word, to us. The difference between heavenly angels and earthly angels is that earthly angels are flawed, weak and yes, 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 earthly angels to our families, our parish, our nation, our world.

Come, Lord, Jesus! AMEN!

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

I have heard it said more than once, when a married couple talks about the possibility of the wife being pregnant, the comment is made: "Well it must have been an immaculate conception!" Even my own parents jokingly said this. But they are confusing today's feast of the Immaculate Conception with the Catholic teaching, the "dogma" of the "Virgin Conception" (celebrated on March 25<sup>th</sup>, the Feast of the Annunciation) leading to the "Virgin Birth" of Jesus at Christmas on December 25<sup>th</sup>.

There is no scripture, no bible passage that gives us historical certainty about the mystery we celebrate today: the conception of Mary without any stain of sin in the womb of HER mother, whom tradition calls "Good St. Anne."

Mary had to be a perfect vessel for the reception of the Word Made Flesh, so she was given "prevenient grace" – the grace "before the coming" of Jesus Christ in her womb. Throughout her life, she was tempted, as all humans are tempted, but because of her free will and being "full of grace," she never committed sin. She stands in contrast to Eve, who in our First Reading, along with Adam, commits the two-fold sin of pride and disobedience.

Life has shown me, and my personal journal of faith as shown me, that the key to a deeper spirituality and to a closer relationship with the Lord and His Church is the virtue of humility. Real humility is not putting ourselves down, or thinking of ourselves as worthless, or allowing others to use us as a door mat.

Real humility is thinking about God more than we think of ourselves, and thinking of others before thinking of ourselves. THAT is true humility.

This is what Mary does in today's Gospel. She freely chooses to say "Yes" to the will of God in her life. She freely chooses to say "Yes" to the new life God wants to create in her womb. The three key phrases Mary says in the Gospel of Luke are these: "Let it be done unto me as you say," (at the Annunciation), "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord," (At the Visitation of Mary and Elizabeth on May 31<sup>st</sup>), and my favorite: "Do whatever he tells you." This is said at the Wedding Feast at Cana. It is a good rule of thumb for life!

Can you think of “humbling moments” in your life, where you were knocked down a couple of notches? Many would call them humiliating experiences. Like with our first human parents, they start with pride.

Trust me, I can name dozens, if not hundreds of times when I acted like I was better than someone else, put down someone else, and then within seconds, minutes, or hours, the exact thing was done to me. The Polish expression for this is “Boza Grozy!” or, loosely translated, “God will get you!” Putting it another way, Karma – what goes around, comes around!

That’s the negative way of looking at humility. Pride and ego are humbled by humiliating experiences. Looking at it positively, be open to God’s will in your life. What do we say every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer? “THY will be done.”

The positive way of looking at humility is found in the Prayer of Abandonment by St. Charles de Foucault. I shared this prayer when I first arrived at St. Martin de Porres Parish, and I think it bears repeating. I pray this prayer every morning, before leaving the rectory. Imagine Mary saying this prayer in today’s Gospel:

*Father,  
I abandon myself into your hands;  
do with me what you will.  
Whatever you may do, I thank you:  
I am ready for all, I accept all.  
Let only your will be done in me,  
and in all your creatures –  
I wish no more than this, O Lord.  
Into your hands I commend my soul:  
I offer it to you with all the love of my heart,  
for I love you, Lord, and so need to give myself,  
to surrender myself into your hands without reserve,  
and with boundless confidence,  
for you are my Father. AMEN!*

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

In the previous weeks of Advent, we have contemplated the entrance of Christ into history, looking ahead to the second coming of Jesus. Those weeks of Advent focused our attention on the violence of history, the bloodlust of men and women, and the way God's kingdom spells the end of the reign of sin and death.

But on this Fourth Sunday of Advent, we turn ahead to the feast of Christmas. For many of us, we've already turned our attention to this feast. Our Christmas tree decorates the home. We have bought gifts for loved ones. Meals have been purchased. We're ready.

For this reason, the Church ought to give us a pleasant Gospel text, one that gets us into a Christmas spirit. Some years on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, we're invited to contemplate Mary's great "yes." We ponder the gift that Mary has received, readying ourselves to receive this same gift on the 25th of December.

But the Church has not given us this Gospel this year. Instead, we come face to face with the strangeness of Joseph.

As I mentioned in my bulletin column last week, one of the highlights of the year for me is our Tree Trimming service. Each year, the children in our Faith Formation program present a skit on the Nativity story. They did not disappoint! There were three points of the skit that really made me chuckle and put a tear in my eyes. Two of them focused on the Angel of the Lord telling Mary and Joseph that they would be the parents of the Savior, Jesus Christ.

In the Gospels, these events are profound, causing all kinds of reactions. But the children in their skit put it much more simply. The angel says to Mary, "Don't be afraid, Mary. You are going to have a baby from God." And Mary simply says, "Oh, OK!" That same angel appears to St. Joseph in a dream and says the same thing, and Joseph says the same thing, "Oh, OK!" Wouldn't our lives be so much simpler, so less complicated, if we responded to God's plan for us, God's will for us, by simply replying, "Oh, OK?"

We don't know much about Joseph. He was a righteous man, the adopted father of Jesus.

Matthew clarifies that he is in the line of David, making Jesus a Davidic king. He walks along with Mary to Bethlehem to take part in the census. In Matthew, he leaves Bethlehem to take his family into exile in Egypt. Like Mary, he loses his son in the Temple. But mostly silence.

We do know something else about Joseph. He's a dreamer just like his namesake in Genesis. But unlike his namesake, Joseph is not infected by the desire for power, the desire to interpret his dreams to make his brothers bend down before him. Jesus' Joseph is a righteous dreamer.

What is a righteous person supposed to look like? We can make all kinds of guesses, some scholarly, others opinionated. The prophets might declare a soul righteous who walks in the path of justice and peace. A person who exhibits a preferential option for the poor is righteous in a Catholic sort of way.

The martyrs of the Church were certainly righteous in their love of God more than their own lives. We can make moral judgments or insist on a particular display of bravery as the litmus test for this quality. And all of these notions, while admirable, would all be wrong from a Hebrew point of view.

The Hebrew word for righteousness implied a true weight, as the one used to balance an honest scale. A righteous weight is one that is what it says it is. I'm reminded of when my mom and I would go to the meat market when I was a child. As the butcher put the meat on the scale, Mom would say, "Now watch your thumbs!" Righteousness described a straight path that goes directly without meandering to its destination. A sacrificial offering was righteous if it followed the prescriptions of the law flawlessly. The measure of this characteristic is met when a thing meets its standard perfectly. That's why, according to the Hebraic use of the word, a righteous person is one who keeps the Law out of love and devotion.

Joseph, betrothed to Mary, was deemed a righteous man.

Now there is a difference between being "righteous" and being "self-righteous."

The righteous man or woman is humble, meek (NOT weak!) who listens and follows the way of the Lord in all ways. The self-righteous man or woman follows the Law so that God will "owe" them for being so good. They look down

their noses at others because they feel superior and all others are inferior. They see themselves as better than everyone else. I am reminded of the Gospel prayer of the Pharisee in the temple, who prayed more to himself than to God: “I thank you that I am not like this tax-collector, sinful and condemned.”

So Joseph, the righteous man dreams, he learns about the pregnancy of his betrothed. Rather than see Mary suffer shame, perhaps even death, he decides to end the betrothal here and now. It will be a quiet affair, one in which he will exact no violence against his beloved.

In this moment of righteousness, not self-righteousness, God intervenes. The child is not the result of an illicit union but God’s very power! Mary is like those women in the Old Testament who give birth in surprising ways.

She is like Sarah, who gives birth to Isaiah well after menopause. She is like Hannah, who gives birth to Samuel after years of tears and prayers.

But unlike Sarah and Hannah, she has given birth without the assistance of a man. She has given birth entirely through God’s own power.

Joseph recognizes the meaning of the dream without assistance. He obeys as soon as he wakes up, taking Mary as his spouse, and taking Jesus as his son.

Maybe, there’s a wisdom to the Church’s decision to give us this reading right before Christmas. The task of Christmas is not just to celebrate a birth. Instead, like Joseph, we must be dreamers. And righteous.

But there’s one word in this story that tips us off to the idea that Joseph is more than a strictly righteous man. The word is “quietly.” Joseph is silently courageous as he provides protection, weds Mary, and welcomes Jesus Christ.

The Christ who comes at Christmas is not an abstract baby, a hypothetical person. He is the Word made flesh, the splendor of the Father.

So, which one are we: righteous or self-righteous? That is the question! Lots of us are tempted to believe in our own moral goodness more than the promises of God. Do you think of yourself as living a virtuous life? Do others perceive you as righteous? Like Ahaz, do you ever hide behind religious motivations in order to escape morally challenging situations?

Joseph is a man who pays attention to his dreams. Do you listen to your dreams, by day or by night, or do you ignore what does not seem “real” or “practical”?

Living in the law is not necessarily a bad thing, and rules are certainly useful guidelines. Joseph was a righteous man, but he was also more than that. Even a mustard seed beyond righteousness is enough to bring the Kingdom of God closer into view. Even if there are only three days left of Advent, there is still time. There’s time not just to deck the halls, but to deck our hearts, welcoming Emmanuel, God in our midst. We need only follow the example of righteous Joseph, the dreamer. If we but dare to dream such dreams.

Come, Lord Jesus! AMEN!

P. S. The third scene in the children’s Nativity plan that made me laugh out loud was when the Narrator mentioned the flight into Egypt. The boy playing King Herod was a tall, lanky blond-haired boy, probably in the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade, standing at stage left with his royal robes. When the narrator said, “Mary and Joseph stayed in Egypt until Herod died...” King Herod grabbed his chest with both hands, slowly lowered himself to a bed sheet on the floor and played dead. Two Roman Centurion soldiers each grabbed a corner of the bed sheet and dragged him off stage, stage left. I said to myself, “What an exit!!!”

[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!