

[Readings: Ex. 16:2-4, 12-15; Ps. 69; Eph. 4:17, 20-24; John 6:24-35]

We live in a 24-hour society. Life never stops. Someone is always up and doing something. And it is never dark. Our cities light up the night. But it starts getting darker as we get older. We get afflicted with night blindness and find it hard to drive at night. It seems as though there is darkness inside now that intensifies the darkness outside. Being “in the dark” can happen in broad daylight. Certainly the people talking to Jesus today are in the dark. They have not only seen the miracle of the loaves but also have been fed by that miracle. Yet they do not see the signs, says Jesus. Well, the signs are right there in front of them: the miracle itself.

It is hard to explain such blindness, but not at all hard to prove its existence. Moses is faced with it again and again in the desert. The escapees from Egypt see marvelous things in the desert – the cloud of fire, the smoke on Mount Sinai, the water from the rock, and yes, their very freedom from slavery. Yet they do not sense the presence of God among them, caring for them. And so they complain, and about what? Food, of course! So God gives them manna. After the dew evaporates in the morning, something like coriander seed, from the carrot family, appears. So, in a sense, God gives them “carrot cake” for breakfast! And still they complain about “this wretched food.” So God, aware of the laws of nature, guides the quail returning from their spring migration to Europe exhausted on the desert sands. Easily scooped up, they provide ready food for the traveler. The word “manna” comes from the Hebrew question, “What is this?” What is this, indeed that God provides for the people day in and day out? Today’s responsorial psalm says that God “rained manna upon them for food and gave them heavenly bread.” Think of that at Communion time when you return to your pew. You have just received the Bread of Angels. The Bread from Heaven.

And think of what we are going to do while you are still wherever you are, before you head for church. Imagine the anticipation of coming to meet Jesus, the Bread of Life. Do you remember the anticipation of your wedding day? Your First Communion? Your Confirmation? Your first live or rock concert? Such excitement. Reminds me of the back-to-school TV commercial with the kids jumping up and down about buying school supplies and going to the dentist. Who DOES that?

We do that before coming to church. We look at what we are going to wear. Do our clothes say, we are going to meet Jesus? Are they the best clothes we can wear to church? Our "Sunday Best." Are they modest enough so that when we sit, stand and kneel, we do not become a moment of temptation or scandal? Do we cover up those parts of the body that need to be covered up?

Do we look at the readings for Mass before coming to church, so that when we hear them, they are familiar to us? Older folks have this luxury in a quiet home to read and pray and meditate. But what about our younger families? I appreciate and I say Thank You to be able to get the kids dressed, organized and in the car ahead of time so you are not late for Mass. I know that it isn't easy, Sunday after Sunday. So thank you. Maybe in the chaos of the ride to and from church, you can prepare the younger children by explaining what is going to happen at Mass, in church.

Three parishes ago, a parent told me about one particular ride to church. Their fifth grader asked his parents, "Do you know when the bread and wine at Mass becomes the Body and Blood of Jesus? The TRANSUBSTANTIATION! The parents were impressed with such a big word which their son learned in his catechism class. And with that distraction, they almost got into an accident!

Make a little game about noticing certain actions and certain words. Talk about the homily on the way home. Bring a little note pad and a pen to take notes during the homily. Thank you for being attentive in your preparation for Mass.

When we get to the parish grounds, do we park sensibly in the parking lot? Do we allow room for emergency vehicles to be able make it down the lane? Do we avoid parking near the sidewalks and the areas marked with yellow lines? This is not only a problem here but in every parish.

Do we assist the elderly and the handicapped as they enter the church? Do we keep our voices low before Mass and after Mass as a sign of respect to those who are praying before Mass begins? Do we genuflect at the tabernacle or at least bow before we enter the pew?

I was very conscientious about doing this when I was in high school. In fact, it had become such a habit with me that when I was out on a date, before I entered the seminary, I took my non-Catholic date to a movie theatre. As we got to our row of

seats, I let her enter first, then before I did, I genuflected! At the movie theater! Once I was seated, she looked at me and asked, "Catholic, huh?"

Do we slide down the pew, so that all those who need, can sit at the ends of the pew? Do we keep our feet off the kneelers and avoid marks on the pews? Do we leave the area cleaner than we found it, removing all used tissue, bulletins and garbage? Do we place the hymnals back properly? Do we settle ourselves down before Mass begins, closing our eyes in wonder and anticipation at what will happen in Word and Sacrament?

God once again feeds the people of Israel. Ironically, the name "Israel" can be translated as "the people who contended and fought with God." They are aptly named. And for being so stiff-necked and complaining, God allows them to wander in the desert for forty years. Why forty years? Because this insures that everyone from the original refugees from Egypt would die or would eventually die in the desert. Maybe the next generation of Israelites will be more faithful and trusting in the Lord.

Thankfully, Jesus Christ does not let us wander aimlessly in the worldly darkness. The bread, the miraculous bread that He gives to the crowds and that He gives to us, is the sign that we all want, that we all need, to see that He is here with us, and that we need to prevent the inner darkness from matching and melding with the darkness outside. This celebration keeps our eyes open and clear so that we can always be sure of the road to the Kingdom of God.

"Sir, give us the bread always!" AMEN!

[Readings: I Kings 19:4-8; Psalm 34; Ephesians 4:30-5:2; John 6:41-51]

When undertaking a journey -- whether it is a vacation, a pilgrimage, relocation, or your life-voyage as a whole -- you need to prepare appropriately. Under-packing is perilous. Over-packing is burdensome. Lugging the wrong equipment is frustrating. Every inch and every ounce of luggage has to be made to count. Some things are always useful, no matter where you're headed.

Maybe Elijah failed to bring humor along that day he fled into the desert. King Ahab and Queen Jezebel were out for his blood, true, but throwing himself under a broom tree and praying for death was not a helpful response to his dilemma. Also, he went on a day's journey into the desert without water and food. While accustomed to living by a spring with ravens bringing him sustenance, he might have been pushing his luck this time. Evidently Elijah was unfamiliar with the saying: God helps those who help themselves. I learned that in the 4th grade.

Elijah was despairing -- again. This time it wasn't only famine and drought. His land and king had gone bad, the prophets who might have pointed things in a better direction were dead, and someone wanted to kill him, and so he decided to lie down under a tree and wait to die. "Enough, Lord, I've had enough. Take me."

God, however, doesn't let him -- also again. Twice, an angel awakens him and feeds him, not only to keep him alive but also to prepare him for a long walk to meet his God.

In what ways do you want to chuck it all, sit under a tree of despair and pray for death? And then, how does God send you an angel to nudge you forward and give you strength and hope for life's journey? Who is that angel for you? It could be in the form of an unanticipated reprieve, a phone call or a sudden visitor, a friend, a stranger's kind word, or what we often call a "lucky break." Grace arrives and a bridge appears over troubled waters, enabling us to cross to the other side unscathed. It's the hour when we might remember to say:

"Taste and see the goodness of the Lord!"

St. Paul reminds us of the excess baggage that weighs us down on the journey: bitterness, fury, anger, shouting and reviling. He also reminds us what items we DO need to pack before we leave, or to discover on the way: kindness, compassion, forgiveness. When choosing our words, are they true, kind, necessary? We bring all this baggage to church when we assemble for Sunday Mass. And we place them on God's altar along with bread and wine for God to bless and to transform into life-giving grace.

As we prepare to celebrate the coming of the Lord to us at Sunday Mass in Word and Sacrament, do we arrive early enough to take a moment before Mass begins to quiet ourselves down, asking the Lord to touch our ears, our eyes, our minds and our hearts to actively participate in the Mass? Do we bring noiseless toys or books for the little ones? Do we give example to our older children by our participation? By the way, I thank parents for bringing their infants and toddlers to church. Even when they are vocal or animated during Mass. It says we have young, new blood in our congregation, and that this parish has a future.

Thank you also parents for knowing when to take your child out if necessary. Once a child was being very unruly, so the parents had to struggle with him as they carried him out. As he passed by everybody, he shouted at the people, "Pray for me!" Another time, I really got into my homily asking questions about what Jesus would do when WE misbehave. I almost shouted, "Is that what we are supposed to do? Is that what Jesus would have us do?" And a little child screamed out, "NO!" I said, "That's right!" I also like when we finish singing and the little ones say "YAY!" and they applaud the music we make for the Lord. That's the Holy Spirit talking through them.

During the Liturgy of the Word, the first half of the Mass, do we sing the opening hymn, the Gloria, the Responsorial Psalm, and the Gospel acclamation? I know that we have been learning a new Mass music setting, and the Gloria is a bit of a challenge. Don't be afraid to "test drive" songs and melodies you don't know. Sing with feeling. You are doing a great job with the other Mass parts.

If we arrive late for Mass, or return from the rest room, do we wait until the assembly is standing before looking for a place to sit? The best time to look for a place to sit, or to return to your pew is when everyone is standing or after the reading/homily, or when we stand for the Our Father. This avoids us becoming distractions to others, and a distraction to me during the homily or our prayer.

Do we actively listen to the inspired Word of God as it is proclaimed to us by the lectors? Do key words touch our ears and our hearts? Do we jot them down? Bring a pen and a pad of paper with you to church.

Are we attentive to the priest or deacon when he preaches the homily? Some people ask why I have notes for my Sunday homilies, but not for Daily Mass, weddings, funerals or baptisms. It's because the crowds for these occasions are smaller and more controlled, and I am not so easily distracted.

On Sundays we have a much larger congregation with far more possible distractions. Also, I have a text because I want to make sure that I present to you the best, most prepared message I can give you. Studies show that Sunday Mass is often the only time Catholics receive catechesis, proper teaching, at the beginning of a busy week. I also want to make sure that the message I give is consistent at all the weekend Masses. Sometimes I am challenged by someone as to the content, so I have in black and white what I say. Also, I have learned that I preach twice as long on Sundays, if I do not have a text in front of me!

We also remember the need for periods of silence during the Mass. The proper place for silence is after the first two readings, after the homily, and after Holy Communion is received. Thank you for praying and reflecting during those periods of silence. Our silent prayer at those times can be powerful.

As we journey together after Mass, the single most critical item to take -- on any journey -- is confidence in God. Confidence literally means, "With faith." I do not go on this journey through life alone. There is a bumper sticker that says: "God is my co-pilot." Then I saw a church sign that said, "If God is your co-pilot, you need to change seats!" God will provide the bread for us, as well as the road we're on when God is both our pilot and our ultimate destination. AMEN!

[Readings: Rev. 11:19a; 12:1a-6a, 10 ab; Ps. 45; 1 Cor 15:20-27; Lk. 1:39-56]

(Most of this reflection comes from Elizabeth Scalia of Our Sunday Visitor, and from Prepare the Word for this day.)

Today's Feast of the Assumption ties science and faith together. An awesome fact of nature is something called microchimerism. (Micro-KAI-merism)

In the simplest of terms, microchimerism is the process by which a smattering of cells lives within a host body but are completely distinct from it. In human fetomaternal microchimerism (or "fetal cell microchimerism"), every child leaves within his mother a microscopic bit of himself -- every pregnancy, brought to delivery or not, leaves a small amount of its own cells within the body of the mother -- and those cells remain within her forever.

A small amount of Jesus Christ's cells remained within Mary, for the whole of her life. Where we Catholics have a limited experience of Christ's flesh commingling within our own upon the reception of the holy Eucharist, Mary was a true tabernacle within which the Divinity did continually reside.

And that is why a mother's bond with her biological children is so strong.

In the Book of Psalms, we read about how the Holy One will not undergo corruption (see 16:10). Christ's divine body did not undergo corruption. It follows that His mother's body, containing cellular traces of the Divinity (and a particle of God is God, entire) could not be permitted to decay, either.

The science makes the theology accessible, because, suddenly, there is no need for guessing: at her falling asleep and death, Our Lady's body, holding Christ within it, could not remain on earth; of course, it would have to join itself to Christ in Heaven!

I love it when faith and reason, faith and science can be woven together into such a beautiful, complimentary whole!

You can also see it in today's Gospel.

As soon as she found out she was expecting, Mary set out and traveled to see her cousin Elizabeth, who was also expecting. At Mary's first words of greeting, Elizabeth's child (John the Baptist) leapt within her. The Catholic theologian John Shea cites this story as "an example of the blessedness in one person awakening the blessedness in another person. The blessedness in Mary calls forth and awakens the blessedness in Elizabeth.

This is not so unusual in a family. In fact, it seems to me to be the usual way things go: One family member recognizes the goodness, the potential, the talent, even the holiness of another family member and calls it forth.

A mom will tell her son, "You really have a knack at noticing when people are feeling down." Or a dad will tell his daughter, "I am always impressed with how much courage you have to do the right thing." Or a wife picks up the spirits of her husband by saying: "I married you because I knew what a good and talented man you are."

This week's questions for reflection:

Whose blessedness are you recognizing? Don't keep it to yourself. Let them know.

Mary proclaims, "The Almighty has done great things for me." Can I list two "great things" God has done for me? How about two more? Make them specific.

Clearly, the arrival of the Messiah means that business-as-usual is no longer the order of the day. How does my daily schedule reflect this new agenda of God's? This is how you and I can "proclaim the greatness of the Lord" and "rejoice in God my savior!"

One of the most moving images in literature and film (one of my top ten all-time favorite movies) is at the end of the courtroom scene in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Atticus Finch, the main character, played by Gregory Peck, is defending Tom Robinson, a black man falsely accused of raping a white woman in the deeply divided South of the 1930s. Atticus has given a persuasive closing argument that leaves no doubt of his client's innocence, but the all-white jury returns a guilty verdict.

As the courtroom clears, his children, Jem and Scout (Jeremy and Jean Louise), watch from the upper gallery with Tom Robinson's friends and family, who are segregated from the white people on the main floor. Atticus gathers his files and begins to walk out. One by one the entire gallery stands, except Scout, who's crouched down, simply taking it all in. A black minister next to her bends down and admonishes her, "Miss Jean Louise, stand up. Your father's passing."

"Stand up. Your father's passing."

The Solemnity of the Assumption is our way of standing while Mary passes. We honor Mary, not only for who she is, but for what she has done. Her beginnings were as humble as yours and mine, but she chose to do what was true and good at every crossroad. She was open to God's offer to serve him in an extraordinary way. She nurtured and cared for Jesus and allowed Him the freedom to grow in self-understanding and purpose. This is what all parents are called to do with their children. Most of all, Mary listened, learned, and became a devoted follower of His way. We cherish Mary because she lived her life with complete integrity. Holy Mary, Mother of God, and assumed into Heaven, pray for us! AMEN!

[Readings: Joshua 24:1-2a, 15-17, 18b; Psalm 34; Eph 5:21-32; Jn 6:60-69]

“As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

In our First Reading, Joshua gathers the nation together at the end of their years of wandering. The Promised Land awaits, as well as a new season of stability, prosperity, and hope. But one thing needs to be determined before the nation takes root on the soil: Who is their God? Whom will they serve?

It's no idle question; actually, it's an idol question. Most ancient peoples worshipped the god of the land, and each god was considered attached to his or her particular patch of ground. The powers of Egyptian religion and magic had been no match for this God, nor had the desolation of the desert years. But now as the people stood poised on the brink of a new world, full of Canaanite gods and well-established cults that worked just fine, should they bank on the God that had delivered them thus far, or would it be more practical and politically correct to adopt the tried-and-true gods of Canaan?

The nation before Joshua was composed of sons and daughters of those who had once stood before Moses and addressed a similar moment of decision: “I set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live.” It may seem like a false choice: Who would choose death and the curse that goes with it? But we who live in the modern culture of death, as Pope Saint John Paul II termed it, are in no position to scoff at the question.

Many of us choose the way of death, and most of us suffer under the curse that emanates from it. Our children inherit a world in which gross inequality, violence, poverty, abortion, irresponsible genetic research, environmental negligence, and war are all givens. We now even question what it means to be male and female, and we redefine marriage to our own twisted tastes. The love of money and power has replaced the love and respect for life. And as every generation learns to its sorrow, there is a point where there is no turning back.

“This saying is hard; who can accept it?”

Jesus knew from the beginning the ones who would not believe and the one who would betray Him. “As a result of this, many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him.” “Do you also want to leave?” “Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God.”

Everything Jesus says or does in the Gospels is intended to lead us to the moment of decision where we choose Him or we refuse Him.

Surely we have choices to make every step along the journey of faith as His disciples. Come follow or stay behind. Seek peace or take up the sword. Serve God or money. Build on rock that lasts or on sand that slips away. Tend to the dead or choose the way of life. Open your eyes or remain blind. Get up and walk or stay where you are. Go up to Jerusalem or return to Galilee. Seek the Kingdom or settle for the world. Either we are for Christ or against him. Jesus doesn't allow a shift into neutral or a response of “no comment.” And let's be clear: Any decision we make has consequences, good or bad.

Look at how we still may be still “slaves” to our past, our resentments, our addictions, our bad habits. The only unacceptable answer to the challenge of faith is to say, “yes” one minute and then go and do “no” the next. The decisive question continues to be posed because each new generation has to address it. We can be baptized and still say “no.” We can receive our First Communion and have our faith ratified at Confirmation and still say “no.” We can journey with Jesus as members of His Church and determine one day that we'll go no further.

We can be faithful churchgoers all our lives yet at the critical hour, when our testimony is called upon, we may waffle and stammer and look away, making a lie of it all. “Are you with me or do you want to leave?” Jesus asks. Saint Peter's answer remains the best, but we can only repeat it if we mean it.

Is the Eucharist real for you? Are the Church teachings about Jesus in the Eucharist true? Jesus says it plainly: “This is My Body! This is My Blood!”

Do you realize what we have here, folks? Do you realize what you are receiving here? Do you let what is here transform you? Your body and blood are mixed with His! Your soul is united with His soul!

If we really believe in the Eucharist and the other beautiful teachings of the Church, then one doesn't walk away when the situation gets really tough.

Eating Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament should change us, transform us, and leave its mark. It should be clear to the forces of evil, to the world, to our neighbors, and to ourselves that our decision to consume the Bread from Heaven is a powerful thing that leads to action.

Life is here. Love is here. Challenge is here. The Cross is here. Forgiveness is here. The choice is ours. The choice begins when we are dismissed from Mass and walk to the church parking lot. A sign above the main exit of a Pentecostal church reminds us: "You are now entering mission territory."

Just a final word on the place of the family, especially based on today's Second Reading. St. Paul says that the head of a married couple and of the family is the husband/father. But as I also heard a wise woman say, "The man may be the head, but the woman is the neck, and the neck moves the head."

Parents are called to be steady, righteous examples to your children so that the children can develop spiritually, morally and physically. Children are a gift from God and not the property of parents. This is contrary to when Roseanne says on her show, "These kids are the only thing we own outright." No, they are "on loan" from God. And parents will stand in judgment as to how they treat these gifts. A Christian Catholic family should be a miniature Church.

Family members teach each other and strengthen each other in faith and they outdo each other in acts of charity. They pray for and with each other. They can learn the faith of their ancestors. And the Body of Christ is again born again and risen again and lives again for another generation! "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." AMEN!

[Deut. 4:1-2, 6-8; Ps. 15; James 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23]

Jesus' disciples eat with defiled hands. This is a problem not just for those of us still living in [COVID-time](#). The disciples come into the marketplace, sharing food with anyone who is there. They don't wash their hands, separating themselves from the common folks. But the [Pharisees and the scribes](#) will have none of that. They want the disciples to be pure, apart from everyone else. They are worried more about purity than inviting the common folks into the Kingdom. They separate themselves from others, becoming exclusive. They are "in" and everyone else is "out."

This, according to Jesus, is disregarding God's commandment. What is that commandment?

Let us remember that the people of Israel are to keep the whole Law. They are to add nothing to [the Law](#), as the Pharisees and scribes seem to have done. The Ten Commandments become 613 Commandments. But more importantly, they are to keep the whole Law. But Jesus says that the Law is not just about regulations or rules governing behavior. To keep the Law is to be a witness to all the nations of God's saving mercy to Israel.

Keeping the Law would therefore require an openness to all those in the marketplace, inviting them into the Kingdom. [Setting oneself apart from the common folks](#) is therefore against the Law. There is no "us" and "them."

Jesus teaches something new about defilement. It's not about what we eat. What we drink. Whether we wash our hands or not, although you should to be hygienic. It's about purity of heart. A heart entirely open to the will of God, to announcing the Kingdom of God to the ends of the earth.

Isn't this what St. James is talking about in the second reading for this Sunday? Yes, the word of God dwells in us, the baptized sons and daughters of the living God. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for people in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Purity of heart is therefore not just an interior or individual affair. Purity of heart is openness to the brother and sister in need.

The one who has no one to care for him. The one who has no one who loves her. This is how we keep ourselves unstained before God.

This is a dose of bitter wisdom that we need to hear right now.

The United States right now -- on both the left and the right -- seems to be driven by a terrifying view of individual liberty.

Catholics have proclaimed, way too frequently, "my body, my rights."

"My body, no reason to get a vaccine."

"My body, who cares about the neighbor who is sick? My family is fine."

"My body, if there's some conservative fool who isn't vaccinated, that's their problem and not mine. Let it be a Charles Darwin test: survival of the fittest.

Here comes James and Jesus, preaching to us.

This is not purity of heart. This is not the Gospel.

Your body is not yours alone. It's not about your individual practices of purity, your personal liberty against the common good.

Salvation through Jesus is different.

It's the body given over for the life of the world. For the neighbor.

It's a bodily imitation of Christ who never met a human being with whom He did not enter a relationship: the [widow](#), the orphan, the sick, the poor, the stranger, the immigrant, the [Samaritan](#). If we are to follow Jesus, let us give up our purity tests. And enter a loving relationship with the common folks.

Love alone, dear friends, is what makes us pure.

St. James challenges you and me in our Second Reading to humbly welcome the Word of God and to "Be doers of the Word and not hearers only." Just to proclaim or listen to God's Word without acting on it is empty indeed.

We become what the Greeks call "hypocrites" – actors who portray one thing on the outside but are someone completely different on the inside.

What would happen if we focused on purifying our hearts? We'd have to give up judgmentalism, gossip, envy, and bias. We'd have to discipline our thoughts and stop entertaining delicious resentments and nursing old injuries.

Purity of heart demands vigilance, daily and hourly practice, and a lot of space for self-forgiveness. The sooner we begin, the sooner we'll get there. AMEN!