

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

Today's homily is going to be part reflection, part classroom teaching, and part action.

Child behavior psychologists tell us that almost unanimously, there is one word a child learns before any other words. Anybody care to raise your hand and guess? It isn't Ma-ma and it isn't Da-da. It's 'NO!' Why is that?

A toddler is walking dangerously close to a hot stove. Out of concern, you look at the child and yell, "NO!" The word and the manner of its delivery startles the toddler, and it walks away from the stove. Later that day, the toddler finds a kitchen knife and begins to play with it. You shout, "NO!" The child, startled, drops the knife and you run and pick it up to hide it in a safer place. Then the toddler, with a natural curiosity, puts something in its mouth that shouldn't be in it. We notice it and we shout, "NO!". The child spits it out.

Any wonder then, why when it's time to feed the child, it looks in the direction of the spoon and says, "NO!" Or when it's bed time and you lay the child in its crib and it shouts, "NO!"

Today's Feast Day of the Immaculate Conception celebrates a "NO!" and a "YES!" "NO!" is what Adam and Eve say to God when they disobey the order not to seek something which is not rightfully theirs. "NO!" is what you and I say every time we sin, every time we let our pride define and defeat us, every time we are invited to do the will of God and we turn our heads, looking away.

Mary of Nazareth, who would become the Blessed Mother of Jesus Christ, is the "New Eve" as the Church Fathers call her. When Eve said, "NO!", Mary said, "YES!" Did Mary have all the facts before her? No. Did she know how the Divine Plan of God was going to work itself out? No. My educated guess is that Mary knew God knew better than she! Because of her "YES!" Mary is preserved from the stain of Original Sin so that her womb would become a suitable home for her Messiah and Redeemer. Because of her "YES!" Mary would assume body and soul into Heaven.

Now the classroom lecture. Cliff Clavin from the TV show *Cheers*, often would precede his words of wisdom with these words: "It's a little known fact."

Here are some little-known facts about today's feast:

1) The feast of the Immaculate Conception (December 8) was first approved in 1476 and extended to the whole Church by Pope St. Pius V in 1568.

2) A commission of 20 theologians, launched by Pope Pius IX to study the issue and issue a final definition, met in 1848. The next year, the pope asked for input from the world's bishops, who responded almost entirely in favor of the doctrine.

3) The formal doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, affirming the freedom of the Blessed Virgin from sin from the very moment of her conception, was proclaimed by Pius IX on Dec. 8, 1854. The document included the following statement (translated from the Latin): "We declare, pronounce, and define that the doctrine which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful."

4) In her apparitions in both Fatima, Portugal, and Lourdes, France, Mary referenced the Immaculate Conception. To St. Bernadette Soubirous in Lourdes, she identified herself saying, "I am the Immaculate Conception."

5) St. John Henry Newman, fourth bishop of Philadelphia and the first (and so far only) canonized American bishop, was invited to Rome by Pope Pius IX in 1854 to take part in the formal definition of the dogma on the Immaculate Conception.

6) Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception is the patroness of the United States. *Source: Information taken from [the Encyclopedia of Catholic History](#)*

And now we come to the action item of today's agenda. God has chosen each one of us, you and me, to be His modern-day Christ-bearers. God wants to birth His Son in each of our lives, our families, our homes. God sends to us modern-day Angel Gabriels with a greeting, an invitation requiring a response,

and a response that will be life-changing and unpredictable.

What will YOUR “first word” be to God? “NO!” or “YES?”

“O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you!”

AMEN!

[Readings: Baruch 5:1-9; Psalm 126; Phil 1:4-6, 8-11; Luke 3:1-6]

“Prepare the Way of the Lord!” How are we preparing?

The readings for the Second Sunday of Advent remind us that this liturgical season is a time of spiritual preparation: While we're shopping for gifts, decorating, and sending Christmas cards, what are we doing to make Christmas a new rebirth of Christ for our daily lives? In our Responsorial Psalm today, we proclaim: "The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy!" Do you actually feel joyful? It takes faith to experience joy in the midst of hardships. Faith grows from knowing that the Lord does great things for us because of His mercy. Repenting from our sins opens us to become aware of this mercy. Therefore, Saint John the Baptizer is proclaiming to us today: "Prepare the way of the Lord!"

Now is the time to ask: What preparations do I need to make? What am I doing to straighten out the messes in my life, the areas of sin that continually distract me from a close relationship with Christ? What penances will help "make straight" my path? What depressing or discouraging valley of hardship needs to get filled with the joy of the Lord? If it seems hopeless, what will I do to let Jesus take charge of it? What mountain of debt or difficult obstacle needs to be made low by having faith in the Lord's digging tools? What's twisted and warped in my thinking, like a road that winds through a jungle of confusion?

We may identify with struggles. These also may be the kinds of folks who will be joining us for Mass at Christmas as guests, visitors or “regulars.”

Throughout Advent, let us examine the ways in which we still need to see the salvation of God. Let us make a plan of action to be holier and happier. As we continue to “Unleash the Gospel,” there is another step we are invited to become a part of. It involves a radical kind of hospitality.

A few decades ago pundits were predicting the demise of the once mighty and proud city of New York. It had become in too many people's minds virtually ungovernable, incredibly dirty, frighteningly dangerous, and so, totally uninviting.

Almost in desperation, the “I LOVE N. Y.” advertising campaign was launched to counter those attitudes. And somehow it worked. The city not only

has survived, but despite horrendous tragedies like 9-11 and power blackouts, it has thrived. The “I (heart) fill in the blank has appeared in other campaigns.

Isaiah the prophet trumpets the call: “Up, Jerusalem!” touting the glories of the centerpiece of God’s chosen and holy land. It is a special place where God makes known the divine role that God plays in the lives of God’s chosen people. Isaiah is doing quite a public relations job.

We could say the same thing about John the Baptizer. He draws people to the waters of the Jordan River outside of Jerusalem, taking its muddy, lackluster waters and turning them into something special, attracting crowds of pious pilgrims and curious onlookers.

I had the blessing of going to the Jordan River on pilgrimage when I was a seminarian. My classmates invited me to join them in that muddy, messy water. I declined. I enjoyed watching them pouring the sludge over each other. I’m sure they needed a bath with antiseptic wash after their Jordan baptism!

All this is being done to remind us that the Messiah is coming soon to Jerusalem and will make what is special even more special. John the Baptizer entices us with his message of repentance and anticipation. As the birth of Jesus approaches, we who are the Church, the “new” Jerusalem, repent and anticipate its growing even more special. We can grow this parish of St. Martin de Porres!

Christmas means warmth and togetherness, generosity, remembrance, and surprise. It is an invitation to care about everyone, even those we routinely ignore or forget. Christmas is the season of peace on earth, a time for draining the moat and lowering the drawbridge, for forgiveness and coming home.

Christmas is our annual opportunity to be born again in spirit and in truth.

It is well known that in most parishes, the greatest attended Masses during the entire year are the Christmas Masses. That is true here. Easter Sunday would be the second most popular.

There will be two Masses on Monday, December 24th at 5 PM and 10 PM, and on Tuesday, December 25th at 8:30 AM and 11 AM. If you are planning to join us for Christmas, in addition to needing your help as lectors, altar servers and ushers, we also need your help as one-time-only greeters before and after

each Mass. Your “job description” will be simple: SMILE and WELCOME our guests!

We ask that you arrive twenty minutes before Mass. Offer words of welcome and direction or assistance if needed. After Mass, help us distribute special booklets and thank-you cards to our visitors and “regulars” as they exit the church. This is how we are planning to make this Christmas a time of “Radical Hospitality” this year.

When I visited the Methodist Church in New Baltimore many years ago, I was impressed and bit overwhelmed at the number of greeters they had there for the Good Friday ecumenical service. As I walked from the parking lot to the sidewalk, there was someone nearby to greet me: “Welcome, Fr. Nick!” As I walked up to the doors of the church, another greeter, “Welcome, Fr. Nick!” as I entered the Gathering Area, a third greeter, “Welcome, Fr. Nick!” As I entered the church, a fourth greeter started to speak. I said, “I know, I know, I’m welcomed here!” THAT’S the kind of welcome I want to see us extend to our guests, visitors and “regulars.” I would like to see married couples and families participate in this ministry of greeter as well.

You will have a chance to sign up next weekend. Please take this to prayerful discernment. Please think about this and pray about this. Help us to make this Christmas a radical way for us to “Unleash the Gospel!” AMEN!

[Zeph. 3:14-18a; Is 12:2-6; Phil. 4:4-7; Luke 3:10-18]

'Tis the season to be jolly, as the song goes. But even if the jolly gene has managed to escape you, or this particular season finds you with plenty of specific reasons not to be happy, there is cause for rejoicing here, as the Bible tells us. In fact, we Christians are called to the vocation of joy, a fruit of the Holy Spirit not dependent on our present circumstances or our emotional frame of mind.

Maybe that's why I am wearing an unusually upbeat color like "manly rose," and why the Church year includes a day called Gaudete Sunday, which means "rejoice." We are called to rejoice, even though it's not Christmas yet. We are invited to joy, even though the fulfillment of our hope is yet to be realized. Without seeing, we believe. Without holding it in our hands, we already claim what has been promised.

The Third Sunday of Advent focuses our attention on the spirit of joyfulness, because this is an essential mark of true faith in Christ. All of the readings are full of joy and the thrill of happy expectation. In the Gospel reading, John the Baptizer preaches good news to the people, and they are filled with joyful anticipation for whatever God is about to do.

Do you know that joy is a ministry? It's an important way to share the faith. We all have a calling to do this ministry wherever there is misery and hopelessness. Joy is different from happiness. Joy is a deep-seeded virtue; being happy is a passing human emotion.

In his encyclical, *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis became the first pope in history to use in an official papal document the word, "Sourpuss." The literal word in the original Spanish was "*cara de viangre*," or "vinegar face;" the eventual Latin translation became "*vultus trux*" or "grim faced." He reminded us that Christians who truly possess the joy of the Gospel should not always look like they just came back from a funeral!

Let's look at how John fulfilled this ministry of joy. We might think he was anything but joyful in his robe of scratchy camels' hair and his fiery sermons about repenting from sin. But look closer. His ministry prepared people's hearts to receive Jesus.

Having faith means trusting God, which means resting in hope, which produces joy. When you or someone you know is lacking joy, maybe it's because Jesus has not yet been invited fully into the situation that's been stealing the joy.

It might be too early in the grieving process, which is healthy and normal, or it might be a lack of faith, which needs nurturing.

Whenever my mom would meet with my dad's sister, whom we affectionately named, "Mean Auntie Jean," it was not a social call, it was a contest of "Can You Top This," as each listed their litanies of illness and tragedy!

The ability to experience the joy of faith comes from turning to the love of God and receiving His comfort in the midst of hardships. It also arises from getting to know the joyful side of Jesus and the joyful purposes behind all of His teachings. Jesus preaches going the extra mile, loving our enemies, and doing good to those who cause us hardships, none of which is fun. What we need to discover and then share with others is that holy living, although not always fun, is what unites us to the joyful love of Jesus and the joyful purposes of everything He preached. Remember, even going to the cross produces joyful results.

The good news is: Jesus didn't just tell us HOW to be holy, He gave us the *power* to be holy: He gave us His Holy Spirit. And when others see the Holy Spirit's activity in us, if they know that Jesus is the reason for our joy, they are evangelized by our faith!

These ideas are foreign to our culture. Why should we be happy about something we don't have? If what we long for has not arrived, how can we celebrate it? The kind of joy to which Christians are invited is not the sort that comes when the reward has already been achieved and there is nothing left to wait for. We are the people who "wait in joyful hope," as we say at every Mass. The time of anticipation is part of the season of joy, because our faith makes us confident that God's promises are as good as accomplished.

It is the nature of being human that we are never quite at home in our world. There is always something missing even in the most perfect day, and something still to be wished for in the most ideal season of our lives. As children, we long to be old enough, and we spend adulthood wishing we were younger.

We may be strong and healthy, but we wish for love. When we have love, we wish for more security. When we have security, we may want more time and freedom to enjoy it. When we finally have freedom, our health may begin to fail or those we love may have moved beyond us. Being human means we rarely if ever can gather up all the fragments of our longing and hold them in one place for more than a moment.

These are the kinds of people coming here for Christmas. These are the folks that you will greet and welcome as greeters.

I again invite you to prayerfully consider signing up in the back of the church by the St. Martin de Porres statue to be a one-time greeter at our Christmas Masses. To welcome, greet and give directions to our visitors and guests. After Mass, to hand them a free gift book and thank-you card for their presence and participation. That's why we can appreciate the idea of celebrating a day that is almost here, a reality that is almost close enough to touch. We know that this world, with all of its remarkable beauty and wonder and promise, cannot give us everything we hope for.

Life is too short, and too fragile, to deliver every desire to our door. Even the happiest person on the planet right now is only "almost home" to his or her deepest fulfillment. Because a really perfect day would never end, and its finality reminds us that suffering and death are always right around the corner.

In the time of John, the people were filled with expectation and asking in their hearts if He is the Christ. He was a great prophet and preacher, of that they had no doubt. And He gave them practical moral advice about how to live: to be generous with what they had, honest in their dealings with each other, and content with their material wealth. But was He the answer to the question in their hearts? Would He put the waiting of many generations to rest at last?

John replied that there was more to come, specifically that One mightier than he was coming who could bring more to the people than John himself could dream of. We will know we have arrived, it seems, when the clock stops ticking and the great advent of human history is finally over.

Where does joy live in you? Where does joy live in you?

Is it easy for you, even in your brokenness, imperfection and sinfulness, to imagine the Lord God rejoicing over you with gladness? Do you believe that God rejoices over you with gladness?

Rejoice and be glad, for our Lord and Messiah is coming soon! AMEN!

[Isaiah 9:1-6; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14]

WELCOME TO EVERYONE WHO IS JOINING US FOR CHRISTMAS!

You may be home from the military, college, visiting your family, returning from out of state, or were moved by the Spirit and are looking for a spiritual home. You will find in yesterday's weekly parish bulletin an article written by our Parish Nurse, who is also our Christian Service Director, Mrs. Renee' Heileman.

She summarizes a talk given by at Sacred Heart Seminary, by Sally McCuen, from the Fr. Solanus Casey Center. In the article, Renee' shares her own reflections. She gave me permission to use some of them in my homily for this year's homily for the Children's Christmas Mass, with a few Fr. Nick twists.

Christmas is a great burst of Divine Love and Light into this world. Of course that Love and Light is Jesus Christ. His presence changed everything. He gave us hope and meaning. No longer was life just about our time on this earth, but it was about getting closer to God and anticipating a time of spending eternity with Him in Heaven. We need to welcome Jesus into our hearts, though, to give us the grace to receive that gift. The Blessed Mother of Jesus, Mary, said "yes" to God's request to bring His Son into the world. Her womb became a blessed place for Jesus to grow in preparation of becoming our Savior. We call this Incarnation: the act of the Word becoming flesh, God becoming human.

Tonight, we heard the story of Christ's birth and of His mother placing Baby Jesus in a manger. Do you know what a manger is? It comes from the French word for an animal's feeding trough: *mangier*. This same word is used by Italians to command us to eat: *Mangia! Mangia!* Can you imagine your mom or dad bringing your new baby brother or sister home and putting the baby in a doggie dish or a cat food dish? That's the kind of crib Baby Jesus had.

What makes up a manger? If you had to build one, what materials would you use? In the time of Jesus, most mangers were built of wood and were filled with straw or hay for the animals to eat. Besides that, in order to fit Baby Jesus, it has to be EMPTY. It has to be STURDY. It has to be SOFT and COMFORTABLE. It has to BE STILL. And it has to be READY.

When Mary, the Mother of Jesus, said YES to receiving the Baby Jesus inside of her, in one sense, she became a manger for her baby. This Christmas, how can you and I become a manger to hold Baby Jesus in our hearts?

1. Empty ourselves. Get rid of all the busyness going on in our minds, the worries about creating a 'perfect' holiday, the little aggravations nagging at us, or whatever is consuming our thoughts and energy. If we can do this for at least a little while, it will leave us fully open to Jesus' presence in our lives.

2. Be sturdy. Mangers are usually made of wood and are strong enough to safely hold a baby. We must be tough enough not to break under the pressure of the secular world's push to only make this a commercial holiday. Be strong to keep holiness alive in ourselves and community.

3. Be soft and comfortable. Hay softened the bed of our Lord. Although we need to be strong in our defense of keeping faith in Christmas, we also have to be kind and loving. This can make us and others more open to Jesus' message of love.

4. Be still. As I said earlier it is important sometimes for us to empty ourselves, but it is difficult to do that if we don't stop all of our activity once in a while and just be still. This calms our minds and makes us more open to receiving inspiration from the Holy Spirit. This helps us to be filled with insight and motivation to share with others.

5. Be ready. None of the above things will happen if we are not ready to accept Jesus and His grace in our lives. We must reject the idea that the world can give us what we need for true happiness. Only relationship with our Lord will do that. That relationship will help us through both good and bad times.

Take a few minutes to read the bulletin and consider these points this Christmas week. Warmly welcome Jesus into your heart and life, maybe just a little different than you have in the past. As you exit church tonight, be sure to take as our gift to you a copy of a book that talks about the main points of our Catholic Faith and of our Catholic Mass, plus a card to fill out and return to us. Merry Christmas! AMEN!

[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 everything you need in this house.

Why does our Church exist? Why follow Christ? Here’s a 25 cent word for you. It’s called the kerygma: the basic teaching of our Christian faith. Sounds like “charisma” but add a “g” in the middle. You can find out more about it if you “Google” it! So consider the kerygma the Google of our Catholic faith! Here is what it says, basically:

God created us out of love — we are a free creation of His goodness. The original plan was perfect happiness with Him.

But we said no to this plan. We rebelled against God by being deceived by the Evil One. When sin entered the world, it separated humanity from God. Redemption was necessary in order to make eternal life with God possible. A Redeemer is someone who sacrifices themselves so that others may be saved.

God did not leave us in sin, and He responded to our infidelity with His fidelity. Christmas is God sending His Son to offer His life for our sins and to rob sin and death of its power. Jesus is the answer to sin and all of its effects. So today we celebrate not only the birth of Jesus, but the Incarnation: “carne” -- “flesh,” meat,” “in” – becoming; “ation” – the act of. The act of becoming flesh.

The Word made flesh. Incarnation. Today’s second 25 cent word! I tried to teach this to the thirty kids that were sitting in front of the altar at the Christmas Eve 5 PM Mass. I got them to say the word several times: Incarnation, incarnation. Then one kid shouted out: “Reincarnation!” I said, “That’s a different religion, and a different word. And a whole ‘nother homily!

Through Baptism, we share in the victory of Jesus Christ over sin. We share in His identity because He took on our flesh and was not ashamed to be called our brother. He gives us the power to live as His disciples; to be free!

Being Jesus' disciple changes our identity. As we are learning in the Archdiocese of Detroit, we are called to become today's third 25-cent words: "joyful missionary disciples." That doesn't mean we always walk around with a silly grin on our faces. It means we have the deep peace and joy of Jesus in our hearts, so deep that people say, "I want what you have." We are called to be missionary: to take the Good News of the Gospel beyond these church walls into a world that needs so desperately needs to hear it. We are called to be disciples – to learn that learning our faith is a cradle-to-grave proposition. We are claimed by God and are then become co-heirs with Christ of eternal, perfect, unbelievable joy in heaven. But the recent revelations and scandals in our Church this year have caused pain, anger and has even led some people to stop being Catholic.

The Chief Shepherd of the Archdiocese of Detroit, Archbishop Allen Vigneron, wrote and sent a letter to every registered Catholic in southeast Michigan addressing this. He speaks of a "great hope" in spite of this darkness, to fix this mess, and that "God wants His Church back" That's the most powerful part of the letter to me. "God wants His Church back. God will give us, His people, a new path to transparency, to justice to accountability and to healing.

The coming of the Word Made flesh this day is God's answer to our sin, to our brokenness, to our hunger and thirst to be the best version of ourselves.

St. Teresa of Calcutta (Mother Teresa) said: "Are we ready to receive Him? Before the birth of Jesus, his parents asked for a simple dwelling place, but there was none. If Mary and Joseph were looking for a home for Jesus, would they choose ... your heart, and all it holds? Let us pray that we shall be able to welcome Jesus at Christmas..."

We hope our Christmas present to you this year will help accomplish this. It has two books in one: "Welcome to Our Parish" and "Your Guide to the Mass." It includes the following topics: What is the Catholic Church and what do we believe? Salvation History, The Seven Sacraments, Roles in the Catholic Church, People at Mass, Gestures and Vestments.

I close with "A Letter from Jesus" which was sent to me by one of my e-

mail friends. It could be in a sense the prayer of Jesus to each one of us.
Imagine Jesus Christ Himself saying these words personally to you:

If you never felt pain, then how would you know that I am a Healer?
If you never had to pray, how would you know that I am a Deliverer?
If you never had a trial, how could you say that you have overcome it?
If you never felt sadness, how would you know that I am a Comforter?
If you never made a mistake, how would you know that I forgive?
If you knew all things, how would you know
 that I will answer your questions?
If you never were in trouble, how would you know
 that I will come to your rescue?
If you never were broken, then how would you know
 that I can make you whole?
If you never had a problem, how would you know that I can solve them?
If you never had any suffering, then how would you know
 what I went through?
If you never went through the fire, then how would you become pure?
If I gave you all the things you wanted, how would you appreciate them?
If I never corrected you, how would you know that I love you?
If you had all power, then how would you learn to depend on Me?
If your life was perfect, then what would you need Me for?

God loves you personally and has a plan for your life. Sin separates you from God. Jesus died on the cross to atone for your sins. This makes Heaven possible for you. Jesus is inviting you to accept His gift of salvation.

Do you want to accept that gift and follow Him as a disciple? Will you allow Jesus Christ to be born again in you during this Christmas season?

“Today is born a Savior, Jesus Christ the Lord!” Merry Christmas! AMEN!