

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

When I first arrived here in July of 2014, it was easy for me to “sneak in the crowd” on my day off or if I was leaving for a break or retreat wearing a regular man’s shirt, slacks or jeans, tennis shoes and a canvas jacket. I could walk around the parish buildings undetected.

Now, 7 ½ years later, I can no longer be anonymous like some “Clark Kent” when I am not vested as a liturgical “Superman” or wearing my Roman collar. I am easily recognized in local restaurants at lunch time, at the store, and even at Subway. A little boy raced up to me and hugged me and said, “I’ve never seen you outside of church! I didn’t know that you had legs!”

Running errands while dressed in civilian clothes in my former parish, a young mother a few years ago was stunned that I recognized her at Target. I remembered her from being in my communion line at Mass. With other people in the aisle listening to our conversation, she said, “I’m sorry, Fr. Nick, I didn’t recognize you with your clothes on!” My reply: What she MEANT to say was, “I’m sorry, Fr. Nick, I didn’t recognize you with regular street clothes on.”

As they ask celebrities on the red carpet at awards ceremonies: “What are you wearing?” “WHO are you wearing?” Our readings for this Second Sunday of Advent are all about clothing. More specifically, about putting on the right kind of clothing. During their wait for the Messiah, the Israelites wore various kinds of clothing. Their “spiritual wardrobe” reflected their historical circumstances as well. In the times of the patriarchs, they were dressed like nomads. When they were forced to work in Egypt, they were dressed like slaves. After their freedom and wandering in the desert, they wore a bride’s dress as the beloved one of God. And in the dark centuries of their routine unfaithfulness, they wore the dress of a harlot.

Now, Baruch is telling them to take off the dark and somber clothing of the widow, the “robe of mourning and misery” and put on the “splendor of glory from God forever.” They are told to be wrapped in the “cloak of justice” from God because of God’s intervention and intercession on their behalf.

In our Second Reading, St. Paul exhorts us to become people of visitation and hospitality, living in a right relationship with God, with others and with oneself. He uses words which would become paraphrased in every official ceremony of the Roman Catholic Church for those admitted to Holy Orders and to the Consecrated Religious Life: "May God Who has begun this good work in you bring it to completion."

All of us are encouraged by St. Paul to increase "in knowledge and in every kind of perception." To discern what is of value. Pray to be set on fire with the Holy Spirit to be a light in the darkness of our world during this Advent.

When St. Paul wrote the Letter to the Philippians, he was in prison, again, in either Ephesus or in Rome and could have already been sentenced to death. This particular letter to the Philippians was his "love letter" to the community which was probably the closest to his heart, as this community, as you are to me.

As St. Luke composed HIS words, he is very specific about who was in political charge at the time. He gives us the VIP list of all the weak and misdirected actors who will play pivotal roles in the drama that Jesus Christ will bring, especially in His last days and weeks on earth. Luke wants us to know that both John the Baptist and Jesus Christ were real people in real time.

The clothing of St. John was camel hair – not quite cashmere! And he is calling on his audience to put on the clothing of repentance and conversion. John was incredibly brave to do what he did, to challenge the crowds to embrace a message of forgiveness and to accept a baptism of water.

In this Advent season, like St. John and like Jesus Christ, we are called to be prophetic voices in our modern-day desert of ignorance, apathy, neglect and violence, especially in Oxford. As our parish mission statement says: "To strive, to celebrate and to serve." In this way, we can become highway builders through difficult terrain, to make smooth a path so that by our lives, our witness and our example, we can lead others to see and to put on the salvation of our God. So... Who are YOU wearing today? Come, Lord Jesus!" AMEN!

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

You may have noticed that today, I am wearing vestments that aren't the usual colors of red, green, white or purple. They are not pink. They are rose, and they are not merely rose, they are "manly rose" and are worn only twice a year, taking a break from what used to be the hard seasons of Advent and Lent. We are reminded by the Church that even if we are sad, even if bad things are happening all around us, we remind ourselves and each other that we are people of joy and hope. We remember this as we pray for our brothers and sisters in Kentucky and other states devastated by yesterday's tornadoes.

There is a difference between being joyful and being happy. Being happy only lasts a short time, like the twenty minutes after you open up your Christmas presents. But then we sometimes get bored and want to move on to the next thing that will make us happy.

But having joy, now that lasts a lifetime. We can even be in the middle of suffering, pain and death but we have an inner joy and peace because we know that this is not the end of the story. What IS the end of the story, is that Jesus is going to win, with or without us, over sickness, evil and death.

The difference between joy and happy is the same difference between preparing for Christmas and preparing for Christ. We prepare for Christmas when we clean our house, decorate it, put up the tree and wrap presents.

But we prepare for the coming of Christ, when we do the Three R's. In school, the Three R's used to be Readin', 'Ritin' and 'Rithmatic. But during the Advent season, as we prepare for Christ, I want us to do another set of Three R's: Repent, repair and rejoice. Repeat with me: Repent, repair and rejoice. Repent means to think again, to think about the way our lives have turned away from Jesus, and to turn back to him. Repair means to fix up – to fix up our lives, to fix up our relationships, to fix up whatever needs to be fixed up in our hearts so that Jesus can come and move in there. Rejoice means to be joyful again. Maybe it's been a while since we have known the joy of the Lord and the joy of the season. This is the time to rejoice.

To take joy in the hope of Jesus Who comes to us at Christmas and every time we welcome Him throughout the year.

Two women who made a tremendous impression on me had every reason not to be happy. One was bedridden in a nursing home in a former parish, and one in my last parish, was severely physically handicapped and only went to church, to the doctors and home. Yet the two of them had the greatest inner peace. I asked them both what was the secret to their inner joy and peace in spite of often excruciating pain. Both of them told me, "Because this isn't the end of the story." Fifteen years separated the beginning of my friendship with both women, and they both taught me the same lesson. They were looking at their current pain and suffering through the lens of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

He was victorious over pain and suffering, evil and sin. The strong faith of these two women told me that one day, they too would be victorious. They have both since passed away. I am sure they both now experience Jesus Christ in His Resurrected glory. In spite of the darkness around us. In spite of the suffering, the oppression, the fear, the anxiety, the uncertainty, the suspicion. Gaudete ("Rejoice") Sunday reminds us that one day there will be hope, there will be life, there will be freedom, there will be joy, there will be peace, there will be wonder, and there will be trust.

Our retired religious priests, brothers and sisters have come to that holy and delightful place already. They outlive most people in any other profession or vocation because they are finally home: a community of faith and loving care where they can prepare for their final homecoming.

This weekend is the annual collection for the Retirement Fund for Religious. Most of our senior priests, brothers and sisters were paid less than minimum wage for their ministry and service. Most were discouraged from participating in the Social Security pension fund. Many have the high medical bills that come along with old age and infirmity. Yet so many of them have that inner joy, knowing that they are rounding the corner and heading for the finish line of life. And that their eternal "retirement plan" is out of this world!

Think of those religious men and women who laid a foundation of faith in

your heart and in your life. Those who inspired you to become the person and the professional you have become. Say a prayer for them. Write them a note if they are still living, and pray for their souls if they have died. And make a donation in their name, living or dead, to the Retirement Fund for Religious.

Our Advent question this day for all of us is, "What should we do?" What is OUR role in the drama and the adventure of Christian faith?

As we are only days away from Christmas, it's good to do an inventory like the crowds, the tax collectors, and the soldiers. This week's reflection questions:

- How does your life point to Christ?
- How have you lead others to receive him? Does your life show conversion?
- Does your Baptism express itself in generosity, fairness, honesty, and satisfaction with what you have?

We give generously because we have been given so much. We also refrain from getting ahead at the expense of others, and we commit ourselves to raising our voices on behalf of those who do not share in our abundance. As John advised all seekers, we give in keeping with our resources, our vocations, and our opportunities. There is enough joy to go around, enough joy for the world, if we take our Baptism as seriously as John took his.

St. John addressed their particular situations and their particular lifestyles. Look at your specific life. Look at how you can improve it. Pray to Jesus for guidance in making your choices. Ask the Holy Spirit to lead you to people who can use your help. Keep your eyes open for the people the Holy Spirit sends to you. REPENT, REPAIR AND REJOICE!

Most importantly, have no anxiety at all about anything. You and I know how the story ends. And where. Come, Lord Jesus. 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, 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. Back by popular demand, I repeat the message I said at Christmas six years ago. People have told me this is their favorite homily I have ever given, and I give it to you tonight/today as my Christmas present to you:

“Everything you need is in this house.”

Merry Christmas! For some of us, it may be difficult to say these words, and other words like “Peace on Earth” or “Silent Night” when there is so much violence, terrorism and overall nastiness in our world and in our culture. Even Kermit the Frog and Miss Piggy have called it quits in their relationship!

I have had more than one parishioner ask me, “Where is all this headed toward? And how do I respond to it?” My answer? Things probably will get worse before they get better. And it HAS over the past six years, haven’t they?

But that’s not the end of the story. We know that God knows how things will turn out. Some things God guides; other things God permits. We know that Jesus Christ took on human flesh in order to save us. We know that if we truly believe, the Holy Spirit will make you and me signs of light in the darkness, and instruments of hope in the midst of anxiety and distress. Your presence here tonight/today is such a sign of light and hope.

Archbishop Allen Vigneron shares these reflections for this year’s Christmas. *Emmanuel* means God is with us; it means Christ is near to us in our struggles and accomplishments, in our happiness and pain. This is *truly* “good news of great joy.”

Our Savior and Redeemer, the King of the Universe, came to live among us as a child, to begin a life of taking upon Himself all the joys and sorrows of

humanity. Having walked this earth as one of us, He understands what it is to be human. The truth that Christ understands our joys and sorrows is particularly poignant this year, as we continue to live through a time of pandemic and mourn the lives lost and shattered in Oxford. We may find it difficult to feel festive joy, but we can be comforted by the fact that Christ is with us even now — *especially* now. We know that almighty God “became flesh and made his dwelling among us” so that he would be near to us always and could show us how much he loves us. Even now, amidst our struggles, this is a miracle to be celebrated.

As we gather with family and friends this season, let us find “comfort and joy” in the knowledge that Christ’s birth means we are never alone. And as we lift our voices together in song, let us joyfully proclaim our Savior: “pleased with us in flesh to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel.”

Back to my reflections...

It is a challenge for us to get ready not only for Christmas, but to get ready for Christ, whose birth we celebrate today. As I decorated the rectory, the house next to this church, I couldn’t help but pause every time I held an ornament or a St. Nick figure that had a special memory or meaning for me. Then I started to think about the different houses I lived in from infancy, my growing up years, and the various rectories I’ve lived in almost 40 years. It began to dawn on me that our Catholic faith and our Catholic faith practice are very much like a home.

Allen Hunt writes about this in his book, “Confessions of a Mega Church Pastor.” He writes about his Methodist background and ministry, and his journey toward and discovery of the Roman Catholic Church.

As he writes of his conversion and embracing of the Catholic faith, he summarizes it this way: “Everything you need is in this house.”

First and foremost, he says, when we gather for Catholic Mass, as we do today at this “Christ’s Mass,” or Christmas, we assemble in the living room to hear stories of our traditions. We share experiences in our family history. Some of the memories are not pleasant, but others are, some even filled with humor.

Then we move to the dining room. The table is set where we share and

eat the same meal which Jesus Christ prepared for His disciples 2000 years ago. In the sharing of favorite Christmas foods, we remember Who gave us the First Meal of Holy Communion, the One for Whom it would become His Last Supper.

Some of the folks go into the kitchen, where basic human ingredients are blended into the experience of human life. The messiness of life, the raw materials that make life both bitter and sweet, the tears that sometimes come to our eyes as we peel the various layers of our personality and expose our vulnerability -- all blend into a pleasant aroma of family and relationships.

While the grown-ups reconvene in the living room, the kids venture down into the basement where they find a trunk full of hidden treasures. There on the top shelf are photographs of past generations. Some photos have names scrawled on the back; other subjects remain anonymous or forgotten.

These are the lives of the saints. We may be more or less familiar with their stories, and especially what made them saintly material – living ordinary lives in extraordinary ways. I'm sure you and I can name a handful of people whom we think are saints, giving us an example of living our faith, even in the midst of darkness. Where sin abounds, grace far surpasses it.

The younger members of the family scramble up the stairs, photos and albums in hand. They race to the grown-ups who explain who these people are. How they came to be in this town, in this house, and how they influenced their children and their children's children. Parents are the first teachers of faith. "Everything you need is in this house."

Christmas is a time of discovery and re-discovery. A time to rediscover the beauty, the joy and the wisdom of our Catholic Faith and the One Who started it all. Do YOU know Jesus Christ? Is there room for Him in the Inn of your hearts and lives? Do YOU know His Gospel message of hope and life? Do you realize what we celebrate every time we gather for Mass, for Eucharist?

Do we appreciate the Mother of Jesus, Mary? That she is the ultimate model of the creature who praises her Creator, giving praise with her entire life and showing us how to get to Heaven through her Son?

We have a special Christmas present for you as you leave church today.



A book called *The Wisdom of Fulton Sheen*, the first Catholic televangelist who taught and challenged us for three decades – the 1950's through the 1970's. Let the Holy Spirit stop you at a sentence or a word which speaks to your soul. It only takes a couple minutes to read. And then come back and share your story, your life, and your faith with us. "Everything you need is in this house."

There is another thing we need in every house and which we hope you will find in this house – the gift of mercy. Be recipients of mercy and be messengers of mercy. Do an honest self-assessment of your lives and to seek forgiveness where it is needed in the Sacrament of Confession, Penance and Reconciliation.

Then, be agents of that mercy to others. Offer in love the gift of mercy and forgiveness to those who need it from us, and seek mercy and forgiveness from those we have sinned against.

Welcome home. This is your faith-house. This is your Light-house. Bring your faith-light with you. If it is as small as a pilot light, we can make it brighter. If it shines brilliantly, come join us and we will help you carry that light to others.

Come and re-discover Jesus. Come and re-discover His Church.

Everything you need is in this house. AMEN!

[Readings: Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14; Psalm 128; Colossians 3:12-21; Luke 2:22-40]

Have you ever lost something that's really important to you, or really valuable to you, or really necessary, and you think about that feeling you get when you lose something or even misplace something. It's just that sinking, gut-wrenching, anxious feeling.

In today's reading, Mary and Joseph managed to lose Jesus. Every parent has had the experience of turning around and their kid isn't there and the kid's wandered off and the parents panic. Now, imagine you've been entrusted with the Son of God. And all of a sudden, you've lost Him. What do you think Mary and Joseph were thinking? What do you think they were feeling? What do you think that experience was like? Mary saying to Joseph, "I thought He was with YOU!" And Joseph saying in return: "I thought He was with YOU!" Then they both look up to the sky and hear a mighty peal of thunder from You Know Who!

The first lesson for us to learn today is that we lose God in our lives all the time, and we don't have any of that anxiety. It happens all the time. We literally lose God, walk away from God, we abandon God, we betray God, in little things or big things. We don't have that anxiety. In fact, we may be downright indifferent. And Satan chuckles, rubs his hands together, and goes looking for his next victim.

Joseph and Mary go searching for Jesus. Imagine what kind of a panicked search that would have been, and then they find Him in the temple. We read that after three days, they found Him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them, asking them questions, and all who heard Him were amazed at His understanding and his answers. Most lost children are found within three days. From three to ten days, the search and rescue mission becomes a search and recovery mission.

So, what do we see here? Even at 12 years old, Jesus has this incredible clarity. He has this incredible wisdom and this wisdom, this clarity, is on display here and in a very, very public place. But when Mary and Joseph see Him, we read, they were astonished.

That leads me to think that this is the first time that Jesus has displayed this incredible insight, clarity, wisdom in public because Joseph and Mary were astonished. Parents, have you ever had the experience of something profound coming from the lips of your children? "Did my kid say that?" Recognize that wisdom sometimes comes out of the mouths of children.

The Blessed Mother of Jesus asks Him, "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously." But Jesus' response is calm, it's measured. He says them, "How is it that you sought me, did you not know that I would be in my father's house?"

So, it just seemed incredibly natural to Him, why? Because Jesus, in His essence, is God, and God can't be lost. So, Jesus wasn't thinking, "I'm lost," because God can't be lost. His parents might have been thinking He was lost. The rest of the people traveling with him might have been thinking He was lost. But the reality was and is, God can't be lost. He wasn't lost. He didn't feel lost. He was calm. He was not anxious. He wasn't lost.

And so, sometimes in our lives, when we think something or someone else is lost, the reality is that WE are the ones that are lost. WE are the ones that have lost something. Mary and Joseph had lost something. But Jesus was not lost, and the overwhelming theme of the reading is that Mary and Joseph were very intentionally searching for Jesus, very intensely searching for God.

Today's Gospel message is an invitation to renew that search in our lives. I think the danger, or the trap, the temptation is to think, "Oh yeah, I sort of know about God. I sort of know about faith." And then we stop searching. We stop seeking God really actively, intentionally. And then it's just so easy to become average, and mediocre, and lukewarm in all things spiritual. So, today's Gospel is an invitation to go searching for God, and His truth, and His wisdom in new ways this week. How do we find God in our own families?

Our Readings for the Feast of the Holy Family give us practical guidelines for parent/child and all relationships

Check out the Scripture citations for today's three readings. Sit down as a family and discuss them today or sometime this week. How your family measure

up to what the Word of God does is calling you to be?

Our Catholic teaching says that every household is a domestic church, a “mini-church,” just as we have mini-marts and mini-malls. On this Holy Family Sunday, we are commanded to believe and to love as Christ loves. We do have the tools to become a Holy Family in our own right. In our search for God, let us pray for the will and the wisdom to use them wisely.

It is fashionable to blame our parents for the people we have become. We inherited their weaknesses and economic status. We were socialized into their worst habits. Yet, all of us have the finest role model possible to whom we can appeal: Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Happy hunting! AMEN!