

[Readings: Numbers 6:22-27; Psalm 76; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:16-21]

Here is a little piece of Bible trivia: In all the centuries of archeological digs and explorations, the oldest copy of a biblical text which dates back to about 650 B.C. is a parchment that contains the words of the blessing we hear in today's First Reading from the Book of Numbers.

The Original Blessing comes from God Himself, and is a tradition that God expects you and me to continue as we begin a new year. A blessing is gratuitous. It is a gift not earned but granted voluntarily, usually out of love. By blessing the Israelites as they journey towards the Promised Land, Aaron and his sons remind the people that their future is in God's hands. The blessing is that the people may enjoy God's providence, prosperity and peace. The term "shalom" means spiritual health and happiness.

Most blessed among God's people is Mary, whose maternity we celebrate today. In today's Gospel, Luke seems to imply that Mary had not grasped the fullness of God's plans for her: She was reflecting on what the shepherds had said. After all, the newborn baby is described as the Christ, as a savior, as a Lord! It is more than understandable that it would take time for Mary to understand and to accept the title that the Church would use to describe her: Theotokos, the "God-bearer." You and I need to continue to ponder what this means to us and to our lives. This title provoked great controversy in the early centuries of the Church and would eventually lead to a great schism or divide.

By having God's Son, the Eternal Word, born of a woman, God has invited you and me to participate in the mystery of salvation. God, out of love for every human being who has ever been born or will be born, became one like us in all things but sin. He becomes one of us in the same way every other human being comes into being: "God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law." Here we come face to face with God's unique presence among us, and the faithful fulfillment of God's promise to Israel.

Who is this Christ Child, and what difference does He make in our lives? And what role does Mary have in our lives?

Mary was not simply a passive instrument in God's hands. Rather, in her acceptance of and firm "yes" to God's plan, Mary discovered and accepted new dimensions to her motherhood and discipleship. As her life unfolded, she constantly presented the Savior to the world, just as in our readings today, she presents the newborn Christ to the shepherds who visit. She invites us to true worship before her Son, and to treasure and immerse ourselves into His divine Mystery. How do we do this?

St. Francis of Assisi says this: First, do the necessary. Then do the possible. And before long, you will find yourself doing the impossible!

In addition to being a day to celebrate the maternity of Mary, today is also a World Day of Prayer for Justice and Peace. It is striking to think of how much violence Mary was close to. As a betrothed but unwed mother, she faced the possibility of death by stoning. Then she found out that the king wanted her child, along with many others, dead, and he conducted genocide to accomplish his goal. Finally, she had to witness the violent death of her son on a cross. Violence and death, though, are not the whole story, then or now. Peace can grow in the ashes of violence, and new life can come out of death. At least that's what happens in God's way of doing things.

Pray for peace today, both for yourself and the world. But don't only pray; do something to help bring peace to conflict. As Pope St. Paul VI said to us: "If you want peace, work for justice. I wish you all a Happy and Blessed New Year, and I bless you with the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson: What lies behind us and what lies ahead of us are small matters compared to what lies with us.

AMEN!

[Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72; Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6; Matthew 2:1-12]

GPS (global positioning system) technology. It is very handy, powering maps on our phones that help us find our destinations. GPS guides you there -- just like Magi following a star. You don't even have to tell it where you are -- it knows! And if you make a wrong turn, it tells you so and recalculates its directions accordingly.

Wouldn't it be nice to have a GPS not only for our travels but also for our life choices? Destination: a long and prosperous life. Directions: anybody's guess. That's the problem. There is no set path that guarantees such an outcome. Do what you will, you can't avoid suffering and death.

But all is not lost. The Good News that comes with the birth of Jesus is that there is a path you can take that will guarantee you great joy and everlasting life. Yes, you will suffer at times and eventually we all will die, but your life will have meaning because you will have lived it for the sake of others. You will find immense happiness in sharing your gifts and recognizing the talents of others. You will feel overwhelming gratitude for the many blessings showered upon you. And believe me, when you count them, they are many.

You find this path by following your EPS -- eternal positioning system -- activated at your Baptism. The simple directions you receive are these: love, forgive, serve.

Why are so many of us reluctant to ask for directions? Maybe it's because we don't like to appear weak or fallible, though we are surely both. Maybe it's a self-esteem issue for some: We're too shy or we don't like to be a bother and halt another's progress. Or else it's the opposite problem: We believe too highly in our own interior compass. Whatever the reason, many of us would rather fumble around indefinitely and hope for the best than to ask for assistance.

But often in life, finding our way is more than a mastery of north, south, east, and west. When life fails to deliver on our expectations and assumptions, we may find ourselves traveling a dark and unfamiliar road where the only sure thing is uncertainty.

When the ancient prophets had visions of change, some predictions were terrifying but others were downright grand. In today's First Reading, Isaiah imagines that Israel, so long a backwater of the civilized world, would someday be an international destination. The riches that were so often carried out of its pillaged cities would one day return on caravans of camels. Its kings had been dragged from Jerusalem in chains into exile. But one day foreign kings would walk to Jerusalem, dazzled by the capital's radiance.

By the way, the difference between a camel and a dromedary is that a camel has one hump on its back, and a dromedary has two. That's why to this day, in the Middle East, when you go to rent a camel, the salesman will ask you, "One hump or two?" (Smiles and groans from the congregation.)

Today's Responsorial Psalm echoes the sentiment in imagining kings of Tarshish and the Isles, Arabia and Seba -- lords of elsewhere north, south, and west—paying tribute to Israel. If the biblical history of Solomon is to be believed, Israel enjoyed at least one hour of greatness that brought rulers from as far as Sheba to pay honor. So for the nation's seers, it was not impossible to conceive that Israel might one day recover that prestige.

No one would have to ask for directions to find their way to such a kingdom. They would simply have to follow their hearts.

The Magi – were they wise men, astrologers, magicians, priests, royalty? Who knows what the Magi were? The only other memorable reference in the New Testament to their profession concerns Simon *Magus*, who was a wonderworker of some sort at the time of the apostles.

We know that dealers in wonder are a mixed bag in the Bible. Some operate under divine authority and others dabbled in the occult. Still others were simply charlatans and rip-off artists. But if there can be good thieves, tax collectors like Matthew, and Pharisees like Paul, we have to admit that categories can be deceiving in the Gospels. If the Magi were occult leaders, they were also reliable ones.

How did the proverbial "wise men" become wise? How have you acquired wisdom in your life? Someone joked that wisdom is the sum total of the lessons

we learn in life just AFTER we could have used the information! What experiences, painful or otherwise, have taught you the most? How do you incorporate your hard-won wisdom into your day-to-day living?

What makes the Magi reliable is that they do not undertake their journey under their own will or their own modest powers. They are led: first by a star and later by a dream. This willingness to be taken by the Hand of Heaven and guided along the way is a sign of deep humility and a hearty amount of trust in a Higher Power. They clearly did not know the God who compelled their journey or their worship. Yet like children, they fell in behind the leadership of the star and went.

From whom are we most likely to take directions? Do worldly powers impress us enough to derail our path? Do we pledge allegiance only to our own authority, our own opinions, or our own will? Most of all, are we willing to take the journey of faith, an enterprise that requires us by definition to surrender, to change, and to grow? Are we willing to be led along a path we cannot predestine or control, toward a goal we only vaguely apprehend?

These are hard questions, but this is what the Epiphany demands of us. God manifests the divine presence before the world. But the only way to see it is to be led there like a child. How far will YOU go? What gifts do WE bring this day to the stable and place before the Lord and King?

Like the Magi, do we leave everything behind to meet him? Are we not more likely to be comfortable, to treat our encounter with Jesus Christ each Sunday as a pastime or a hobby or a task to be done with rather than seeing it as a pilgrimage toward a meeting with the living God?

Along the way, the Magi meet Herod. We know that Herod is a dangerous character, more interested in securing his power than welcoming God's king. The Magi don't know this and thus are wooed into trusting the lecherous ruler. The Magi are given the name of the city where they may find the unnamed king.

But there is also an ominous invitation. They're told to come back, to tell Herod where the newborn is so that Jesus' life may be ended.

Those who leave everything behind to encounter Jesus will also find along the way many Herods.

It is wise to ask ourselves who or what are the Herods in our lives? Is it our love of money, unreasonable politics, tempting addictions or pornography?

If we are to guard ourselves against the Herods in our lives, we must be prepared with the proper gifts to offer to Jesus Christ.

We must bring our gold. When gold is polished, it is possible to see one's reflection in this fine metal. On our pilgrimage to meet Christ, we must bring self-knowledge. This self-knowledge is not gained through taking online quizzes, but through the mirror of the Scriptures. We must see ourselves as creatures before God, incomplete before the Creator of the cosmos.

We must bring our frankincense. Frankincense is burned, producing the most pleasing of odors. We must come to Christ as those whose very lives produce a fragrant incense, wafting up into the heavens. Our whole selves are meant to be offered to the newborn king and thus to the world.

We must bring our myrrh. If we are to meet Christ, to love the King of Justice, we must die. Our first death is through baptism, dying to sin. But the Christian life is one of *asceticism*, dying to our desire for power and prestige. That's where we get the word ascetical and the phrase the ascetical life.

If we read the Magi's offerings in this way, we come to see that Epiphany is not just the feast but the very pattern of joyful, missionary discipleship each of us must embrace if we are to come and adore Christ the King all year long.

Let us bring the gold of our material wealth and physical possessions; the incense of those Spirit-moments and God-moments of our lives; the myrrh, the funeral oils of our suffering and pain, and lay them before the Lord. How far will YOU go? Come, let us adore him. AMEN!

[Readings: Isaiah 49:3, 5-6; Psalm 40; 1 Corinthians 1:1-3; John 1:29-34]

First impressions can be deceiving. Think of the people who are in your life today and compare your original perception of them with what you know now. Sometimes our initial “take” on someone is off by a little, and sometimes by a lot. A few of my closest friends began as adversaries. They admit they didn’t care much for me either at first meeting. If you can even imagine that!

Dorothy Day treated the destitute and often frightful-seeming persons she encountered with great care and respect because, as she said, you never know when you are entertaining angels unawares. To see the angel in the homeless man or the Madonna in the pregnant girl takes a certain pair of eyes honed by practice, prayer, and regular exposure to the truth.

John the Baptist, as we saw last week, was on a learning curve about Jesus the same as the rest of us. We think of John as having the home-court advantage because he was the prophet connecting the Old and New Testament to announce “the One who is to come.” Since he was the one “preparing the way,” surely he knew all about Who and what was coming! But John was not a comic book hero endowed with superpowers. He was a faithful servant of God straining to hear the Word being spoken in his times. As we strain in our times.

By all accounts, John did have an innate instinct about the presence of the holy. Didn’t he jump in his mother’s womb when Mary of Nazareth, large with child herself, came into view? That sense of the sacred would serve him well. But it was not infallible or immune to human factors like ignorance or doubt.

John makes the admission in today’s Gospel that, although it was his chosen profession to be the forerunner of the Coming One, “I did not know him.” He says these words twice, so that we have no confusion about his meaning. John had no cosmic pipeline making him a mere trader of inside information.

Like all the prophets of Hebrew scripture, he was simply a workhorse in the spiritual life with a career professional’s dedication to looking, listening, and paying attention for the presence of God breaking into time happening all around us in every age. As we look, listen and pay attention for the presence of God.

John hesitates when Jesus presents Himself for Baptism and betrays his reservations again later on while he is under arrest and beginning to wonder if Jesus is the right Messiah. He has no X-ray vision to validate his sense that “Jesus is Lord,” as Paul will later say with complete conviction. It is far easier on the long side of the Resurrection to make that claim. We stand in amazement at John the Baptist, on the short side of salvation history, making his profession of faith before Jesus had frankly done a blessed thing.

We can hypothesize that John’s faith grew from the time he surrendered further to the divine agenda in baptizing Jesus to the day he was prepared to identify him as the Paschal Lamb, the Lamb of God.

In this sense we can consider Isaiah’s prophecy about the one called from the womb to gather Israel back as a preview of John’s ministry as well as that of Jesus. Jesus is “the light to the nations.” The Gospel is quick to distinguish the true light from the lamp bearer. But John’s eagerness to raise the visibility of this light by his own ministry and testimony qualifies him to be a “glorious” servant of God, too.

If Isaiah’s prophecy is a prequel to John and Jesus, then Paul’s ministry is the sequel -- let’s call it Light to the Nations II. Because it’s not the end of the story but only the second episode in what seeks to become a franchise. Paul asserts to the folks at Corinth that he serves at the will of God, no less. Like the Baptist, Paul is an ordinary man “called” to do an extraordinary thing. And he gives his full attention to the task until his consciousness is replaced by Christ-consciousness. Paul’s learning curve was unusually steep, and he raised the light of Christ high enough for the Gentile world to see it.

It is easier for us to profess Jesus as Lord with the testimony of John, the evangelists, and Paul under our belts. We also have 20 centuries of canon and doctrine, liturgy and theology, not to mention the lived example of the saints and martyrs to light our way.

Considering *our* home-court advantage, one might expect our lantern to be raised higher than ever. If Jesus is to be the Light to the Nations, our attentive and devoted participation is required.



Isaiah says the servant people of God will become a “light to the nations.” In what ways do I help others to be sources of goodness and light to the community?

Saint Paul writes that those who belong to the Church are “called to be holy.” What do I understand holiness to mean? What are the practical steps one takes toward holiness? How do I encourage holiness in myself and others?

John the Baptist call Jesus the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” How can I promote a greater spirit of self-sacrifice in myself and those with whom I am in contact?

At Mass each week we quote Saint John the Baptist, who said, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” Because the Gospels were spoken for decades before they were written down, it’s likely that Christians have been repeating these words for more than 2,000 years. He looked at Jesus and saw someone who’d had a radical and deep experience of the Spirit and invited everyone to “Behold!” All these years later, the invitation stands.

In the end, you and I are exactly like John. We have beheld the glory of God in the sacraments, in the sacred Scriptures, in the hungry and thirsty in our midst. And yet we have also suffered the darkness of ecclesial scandal and of a loveless age drunk on power and prestige. We have suffered from illness, sickness and death.

Like John, we can cry out to Jesus, asking Him to identify Himself as the Messiah, to make His presence known not only in signs but in actions. And we can announce the belovedness of the Lamb of God by remaining faithful to Jesus, even in the darkness of our lives. John’s confession, when it has force and when it fumbles, is ours, too! You and I are called to be light to the nations. Hold your lantern high! AMEN!

[Readings: Isaiah 8:23-9:3; Psalm 27; 1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17; John 2:1-11]

Today we celebrate the first-ever Sunday of the Word of God, proclaimed last September by Pope Francis. Today we let Jesus open our minds to the beauty of the Scriptures, so we can proclaim the truth of the Good News that they contain. The Scriptures are not dead letters on a page, but living words that have been given life by the Holy Spirit, who also gives light to our minds when we read them. Nor is the Word of God just a list of rules, but an invitation to share the life of the living God, their author.

In his letter establishing today's celebration, Pope Francis said, "It is fitting, then, that the life of our people be constantly marked by this decisive relationship with the living word that the Lord never tires of speaking to his Bride, that she may grow in love and faithful witness" (*Aperuit illis*, 2).

Every story told in the Scriptures, even the most challenging, reminds us that God loves His people and will always be faithful to the covenant He has made with us. God sent us his Son, the Word Incarnate, not only to speak these words of faithful love, but also to show us the depths of faithful love by dying on the cross and rising from the dead. Every word of Scripture points to this message of love enacted in the person of Jesus Christ, Who is the Word himself. In honor of today's celebration, we thank the lectors at our parish who proclaim the Word of God and the priests and deacons who preach it.

There is a stereotype that we need to change: that Catholics don't read the Bible. Anyone who has grown up Catholic can attest to this -- to a degree. While the Mass is rich with Scripture, and the Liturgy of the Hours, the Universal Prayer of the Church extends this prayer and meditation of the Word of God, how many Catholics actually devote themselves to the Scriptures?

Let's take a closer look at its invitation.

St. Jerome -- on whose feast day Pope Francis announced the new Sunday of the Word of God -- was asked by the Pope of his time to translate the Hebrew Scriptures -- the Old Testament -- and the Greek Scriptures -- the New Testament -- into a language the people could understand.

What was that language? LATIN! We are blessed that we have the Bible available to us in our English language.

A famous quote by St. Jerome is this: "Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ." When you let those words sink into your soul, they give a profound challenge: Do I truly know Christ, or have I become accustomed to being only acquainted with Him?

We can't look at Scripture as just any other book, for in the words of the Bible, we meet the Word himself -- Jesus. In fact, the Catechism of the Catholic Church profoundly states that "for this reason, the Church has always venerated the Scriptures as she venerates the Lord's Body" (No. 103). We cannot call ourselves Christians if we do not devote ourselves to Christ's Body and His Word.

So, as we dive deeper into the fresh New Year, and as we celebrate this "Sunday of the Word of God," I want to offer a challenge. This year, make an effort to meet Jesus Christ in the Holy Scriptures, the Bible.

This will look different for many people. Maybe it means picking up the Bible and reading it cover to cover -- a chapter or passage each day. I did this when I was in high school. From the Book of Genesis to the Book of Revelation. And I was just as confused as I was before I began reading it, because I didn't have any commentaries to help me understand the more complicated books.

Maybe it means spending time with one book of the Bible for weeks or months. If you don't know where to start, I recommend the New Testament Gospels, which reveal Christ himself, and the Old Testament Book of Psalms, which are the same prayers Jesus would have prayed when He walked the earth. If you need accountability, join or create a Catholic Bible study with friends. Or if you need more structure and resources, find a Sunday devotional or listen to Catholic commentaries on the Scripture through programs such as Formed.org, which our parish has access to.

Good commentaries never take a Bible quote out of context to support a particular idea. It must be placed in the context of the verses before and after it, and the sense of the Book itself. I can quote a Psalm 14, verse one which

proves that God does not exist. The Psalm begins by saying, "There is no God!" So there! Until you read the words preceding that phrase: "The fool says in his heart, there is no God!" The Books of the Bible are like the various sections of a newspaper. The first section deals with current local, national and world news. But if you look at the sports page, "Giants slaughter Cardinals," you know they are talking about a baseball game, not an invasion of the Vatican by goliaths!

Above all else, go at your own pace, but diligently make time for Scripture every day -- to silently reflect upon and to be open to the voice of God. I am amazed when I prepare my homilies that as I read the Word of God and the various commentaries, a word or phrase will touch my heart, touch my soul. This also happens when I pray my Morning and Evening Prayer, also based on the Psalms and Bible readings.

That is how Jesus approaches each of us in Scripture -- He wants us to know Him, to understand that He is coming for each of us as individuals.

So this year, get to know Christ in Scripture. Let Him reveal himself to you as a real person, the one who knows your soul more intimately than you know yourself. Just as Christ is waiting for us to visit him in the Eucharist, He is waiting for us to know him through His Word, THE Word. AMEN!