

[Habakkuk 1:2-3; 2:2-4; Psalm 95; 2 Timothy 1:6-8, 13-14; Luke 17:5-10]

“How long, O Lord? I cry for help, but you do not listen! I cry out to you, “Violence!” but you do not intervene. Destruction and violence are before me.”

Who is the speaker in today’s First Reading? A parent whose child is dying of cancer? A wife awaiting the return of her husband from a fourth military deployment? An elderly person who keeps reading about school or workplace shootings? A young person who is afraid that the next terrorist act is just around the corner? The prophet Habakkuk wrestles with the questions of violence and injustice of his time as we lament ours. Including Hurricane Ian.

Why does evil occur right before God’s eyes? Why does God not prevent or at least erase the evil done? If God cannot do anything about it, Habakkuk says, spare us who have to look at it!

Later, when God responds to the prophet’s questions, it is not with answers or solutions. It’s with a promise. A promise of deliverance and restitution. Six times after today’s First Reading excerpt, God promises that the vision will be fulfilled. But it will take faith and patience to reach that day. God encourages us to wait in faith.

In our Second Reading, St. Paul exhorts the young bishop Timothy and his people to keep the faith in the face of difficulty. Note that once again, St. Paul writes these words while sitting in a dungeon in a prison. Only the endurance of suffering can embolden us to the point of inviting others to embrace it. What circumstances in YOUR life could give you that kind of courage? What trials have helped you grow in patience and in faith? I’m sure we could fill two pages!

Between the two Masses this morning, I spoke with three parishioners who told me about their journeys to wellness. To find the right combination of medicine, therapy and lifestyle changes took one month for one person, three months for another person, and three years for me. Maybe that’s why the medical professions call us “patients! We need faith and patience in our physical lives and in our spiritual lives!

How different would your faith be if simply arriving at Mass this morning, simply being in this church for Mass, could cost you your life? That is the price our Christian brothers and sisters are paying in the Middle East, in India, in China and in Africa. The Center for the Study of Global Christianity in the United States estimates that in the last decade, 100,000 Christians died for simply being Christian. In their homes, in their schools, in their hospitals, and in their churches. That’s eleven Christians per hour.

Violence. Destruction. Discord.

According to the International Society for Human Rights in Frankfurt, Germany, 80% of all acts of religious discrimination in the world today are directed against Christians. How do we react to those numbers, that reality?

It seems that our own country no longer defends us and our religious freedom; we are placed in the same situations as our Christian, Catholic brothers and sisters overseas. Only we are not being attacked with bombs and bullets; we are being attacked from within by anti-religious government executive orders, legislation, judicial decisions, terrorist attacks on pregnancy centers and personal attacks of violence on Pro-Life demonstrators and door-to-door volunteers.

We can become frustrated, apathetic and numb to all of this sin, this evil. We also realize that our nation one day will be judged by how we treat the most vulnerable. Evil wins when good people do nothing. What CAN we do?

This is where we start. The month of October, in addition to being the month dedicated to the Most Holy Rosary, is also Respect Life Month. We pray the Rosary for our country. Next, we are challenged to reflect upon what the Catholic Church calls the "five moral non-negotiables": abortion, embryonic stem cell research, euthanasia, human cloning, and homosexual unions. Learn why the Church forbids these sinful actions for valid moral reasons.

There is also to consider this month, especially as we prepare for Election Day in November, the seven moral principles developed by the United States Council of Catholic Bishops: human life and dignity; marriage, children and families; religious freedom; the preferential option for the poor; health care; immigration, migration and refugees; and education.

St. Paul tells Timothy, and he says to US: Stir into flame the gift of God. Do not be ashamed of your testimony as a voting Catholic with a well-formed and informed conscience. And we'll say, as the servants in today's Gospel parable do, "No big deal: we obey because that's our job." It's also, we might add, "our joy and our pleasure."

Here to speak about another way we can respect life and put our faith into action through a new ministry in our parish is Stacey Conte from the Interfaith Volunteer Caregivers of Macomb County...

[Readings: 2 Kings 5:14-17; Psalm 981; 2 Timothy 2:8-13; Luke 17:11-19]

One of the many delights I enjoy about children is how they respond when I give them something. There is a momentary pause of silence, and then I hear from the grown-up who is with them say – say it with me -- “What do you say?” Then the little one would say, “Thank you!”

Little Sarah was raised well by her parents. When she was two years old, she was extremely active. One day Sarah ran into the kitchen in search of a mid-afternoon snack. Hurriedly, she said to her mother: “Banana, Momma, Banana!”

Jodi, her mother, handed her a banana. Sarah quickly grabbed the banana and turned to rush back out of the kitchen. But before she took very many steps, her mother said: “Sarah, come back. What do you say?” Sarah screeched to a halt, turned back around and said: “Please! Thank You! You’re Welcome! God Bless You! And I Love You, Mommy!” Sarah covered all her bases! The only words Sarah’s mother was looking for were “Thank you.”

Why did only one man cleansed from leprosy return to thank Jesus? Someone has made a list of nine suggested reasons why the nine did not return: One waited to see if the cure was real. One waited to see if it would last. One said he would see Jesus later. One decided that he had never had leprosy in the first place. One said he would have gotten well anyway. One gave the glory to the priests. One said, "O, well, Jesus didn't really do anything." One said, "Any rabbi could have done it." One said, "I was already much improved."

- Can you relate to the nine lepers who were cleansed and went merrily on their way, without looking back? When you are ill or in pain, and then begin to feel better, do you take that healing for granted?
- How can you become more conscious of the many ways -- great and small -- that you experience healing every day? How can you make these healing moments an occasion for thanksgiving?

Naaman, the main character in today's First Reading, is the equivalent of a four-star general. He also had a skin condition which some thought was leprosy. Elijah the prophet tells Naaman to bathe seven times – the perfect number of times – in the Jordan River in order to be healed. Naaman is offended, because he could have saved himself a long trip to Judah and bathed in the much better waters of his homeland, Syria. But he humbles himself and does what Elijah tells him to do. The results are found in today's words in our First Reading. Naaman was looking for healing; he got that and more: faith.

St. Paul reminds us in our Second Reading that God's Word will not be silenced, regardless of how bad the messenger or the mediator of the Word is, or how badly they would be treated. Despite his own being chained in prison, God's Word would not be chained for the second and third generation of Christian believers. To profess your Christian faith in the first three centuries of the Church's existence meant persecution, imprisonment and probably death. In our days, we are experiencing persecution from the media, social networks and government agencies. We have not yet had to face imprisonment and death!

Speaking of mission, above the church exit doors of a small church in New Baltimore, where I was pastor before here, a pastor hung signs with this message: "You are now entering mission territory." Isn't that amazing? The moment you leave this holy place, you are entering mission territory. In your community. In your home. In your school. In your workplace. At the shopping center. At the restaurant. Even our own parking lot! "You are now entering mission territory." We do not undertake this mission alone. We are armed by God, by the Church, by the Sacraments, and by the teachings of our Church.

We can't make it on our own. One of the ways to show our need for the Lord is to practice gratitude. We start with saying "thank you." Often. We listen to and watch for those moments that happen throughout the day, where you can say "thank you." The big and small moments of daily life. The word "Eucharist" means "thanksgiving." So... What do we say to Jesus today at this Mass? "Thank You!" AMEN!

[Wisdom 11:22-12:2; Psalm 145; 2 Thess. 1:11-2:2; Luke 19:1-10]

In today's well-known Gospel from Luke, we need to recognize the touch of humor and personal call within it. Many times in the Scripture, we see Jesus passing by or passing through a certain place, and crowds gathering.

In the town of Jericho, Jesus finds a curious little fellow of small stature named Zacchaeus, literally up a tree. Zacchaeus is a figure of contrasts. Though he is a person "short in stature," he rises above others. Though he is an Israelite and "a chief tax collector," he is an outsider among his people. Though pursuing an "unclean" profession, he is nonetheless the "clean one" (which is the meaning of the name *Zacchaeus* – "the clean one"). In a crowd of grumblers, he voices his faith. Though wealthy, he gives half his money away.

Zacchaeus doesn't really know Jesus, but is clearly in search of Him. Was it curiosity or something deeper? When Jesus takes notice of Zacchaeus and offers His own hospitality to him, this short, clever fellow responds and accepts Jesus, changes his life, turns his life around and comes to experience wholeness and saving grace right in his own home. One commentary asks where "Mrs. Zacchaeus" was when "Mr. Zacchaeus" made his generous gesture.

Was she in the back of the dining room, as most women were regulated at the time? Was she serving the meal, which was highly probable. But she was a wealthy woman who probably had servants serving the meal. Maybe she was sitting next to her husband, and whispered in his ear: "What are you saying? We'll talk later after our guests leave!"

Jesus says to Zacchaeus, "Today I must stay in your house." Jesus says the very same thing to you and to me. Jesus wants to take up residence in our "house," the home of our hearts.

Jesus likewise constantly passes through our lives every day in one form or another. Do we recognize His presence? Do we unhesitatingly invite Him into the homes of our hearts? Are the doors of our lives, our hearts always open and ready to offer Jesus hospitality and welcome? To be really ready, we need to be always prepared to meet Him and welcome Him in any experience.

So often our eyes are not quick or clear enough to see Jesus in our lives. We all have handicaps – prejudices, misconceptions, bad training, spiritual laziness, fears and doubts – which block our view of Jesus.

The first reading from the Book of Wisdom presents a new perspective: “Before the Lord the whole universe is as a grain from a balance or a drop of morning dew come down upon the earth.” This is the perspective of the Creator.

In contrast to God’s greatness, the whole universe is little: but a “drop of dew,” a single “grain.”

Don’t miss out on these powerful words of Wisdom. God overlooks our sins so that we may repent – turn our lives away from sin and turn towards God. Because who is encouraged to repent when they are rejected and despised? Shunning is a poor response to those who have already separated themselves by their actions, whether in families or religious communities.

The Lord, the “lover of souls,” rebukes offenders “little by little,” to encourage them to abandon their wickedness. Gaining this perspective reveals our littleness. We are the drops of dew, the grains of sand. But it also helps us see the greatness of God’s mercy.

As the Creator of the whole universe, God, as Wisdom also tells us, loves all things and has mercy on all His created people. “How could a thing remain, unless [God] willed it; or be preserved, had it not been called forth by [God]?” God’s mercy reveals that he is truly the “lover of souls.”

We all have short stature: we are much smaller than God and cannot see the goodness that He sees in us, beyond our hardships. In our own short-sightedness, we conclude that God has abandoned us, and we feel so very alone. We need fellow believers to remind us of who we are, what we are called to be and what we are called to do. That’s what brings us here every week.

May God help each of us to be worthy of His call and complete all that He desires to do for us through faith. Invited or not, Jesus desires to make His home with us and within us. Like little Zacchaeus, let us open the doors of our hearts with longing and welcoming hospitality. AMEN!