

[Readings: Isaiah 8:23-9:3; Psalm 27; 1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17; Matt. 4:12-23]

Our First Reading from Isaiah this Sunday stops short of its most famous lines that we hear on Christmas Eve: “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Almighty God, the Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. We do not get to hear these words spoken out loud this Sunday. Perhaps this is because Matthew cites the beginning of our reading from Isaiah word for word in his Gospel: “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, the people who sit in darkness have seen a great light, on those dwelling in a land overshadowed by death light has arisen.” These words of Isaiah are then juxtaposed by Matthew with Christ’s words: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali are redeemed and consecrated as they give us the Messiah.

In this way, Matthew offers us an interpretation of Isaiah’s prophecy: Jesus is this wondrous child, born to dispel our darkness and gloom. Understanding who this “great light” is, Matthew also offers us an interpretation of our “darkness and gloom.”

Ultimately, it prophesies the arrival of Jesus Christ. The darkness also refers to the situation of Israel when Isaiah was prophesying. Israel was in a “land of gloom” because they were oppressed under foreign nations. To Israel, then, the Prince of Peace would bring the “light” of freedom. And with it, this Prince of Peace would bring joy and abundant rejoicing.

In today’s Gospel, the men Jesus chooses as His Apostles and as His Disciples – and that includes you and me – are called, invited and challenged to bring light to the dark areas of our world, our nation, our families and our Church.

It doesn’t take much searching to find the darkness. It surrounds us. It envelopes us. It discourages us. It depresses us. The Apostles and the Disciples in the time of Isaiah, Jesus and St. Paul faced the same dark challenges. How do we bring light into the darkness of our current world?

Back in 2016, our Chief Shepherd of the Archdiocese of Detroit, Archbishop Allen Vigneron, called us all together as a Synod, a Gathering. To pray, to reflect, to discuss and to create a new vision for each one of us to embrace and to put in place for the sake of the future of the Church in Detroit.

Parishes began rediscovering their gifts and talents, redefined their mission statements and goals and saw practical ways to become “joyful missionary disciples.” I tried to fit that phrase in my Sunday homilies every week. Remember that? Then COVID-19 struck us and hit us hard. Public Masses were banned. Parish activities were put on hold. Visits to hospitals, nursing homes and private homes were in jeopardy.

Once restrictions were lifted, parish life could once again resume. Unfortunately, most parishes are operating at only 50%. Half of our people still have not yet returned to regular Sunday Mass. The level of volunteers in our parish is at an all-time low. This is happening at many parishes.

Our response to the current situation is Families of Parishes. Each parish will no longer be a separate, isolated and competing entity. Rather, like the various communities in today's Second Reading, we are uniting as several parishes to make up one family. With St. Blase, St. Ephrem, and St. Michael Parishes in Sterling Heights, we will gather at St. Blase this Thursday evening at 7:00 PM with our Regional Bishop, Robert Fisher, who will commission us as the “Saints among the Saints Family.” Join us as we make history this week.

Three questions have come up often regarding our Family of Parishes.

Will we have to change the name of our parishes? NO! We will remain St. Martin de Porres, St. Blase, St. Ephrem, and St. Michael. However, our Family will be given a name. Ours will be “Saints among the Saints Family.”

Will all of our finances be put into one big pot to pay all of our bills? NO, NO, NO, NO! Each parish will maintain its independent finances. Although we will be looking at how we can best share our many talents and limited resources, without having to duplicate some of the same services in each parish.

Will the pastors be reassigned? NO. We will remain as pastors of the parishes where we currently serve.

Think about your own call to discipleship this week. Did it come out of the blue? Or was it a slower process, involving struggle, doubt and questions, developing over time into what it is today? At some point, did a leap of faith come into the picture, when life's most important decisions need to be made?

Let us walk together with hope in this new chapter of our parish history and of the history of the Archdiocese of Detroit. I truly believe from the bottom of my heart that this Family of Parishes process is a work of the Holy Spirit. Let us pray for its success. AMEN!