

[Readings: Malachi 3:1-4; Ps. 24; Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40]

Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, after the last Sunday Mass, she would stay in church. She kept herself busy gathering the discarded bulletins, spilled Cheerios, and dropped tissues from the pews. She never talked to anyone, but would smile if they acknowledged her.

But she stayed and did it only on those Sundays when Baptisms were scheduled. Her tasks completed, she would silently join with the families gathered for the ceremony, smiling as if she was remembering happier times from her past. Since no one knew her, everyone thought she was from the other side of the family. Occasionally, she'd even slip quietly into the group photo of everyone there. A few times she was able to hold the baby for a picture!

Imagine when the family relooked at those pictures years later, husband and wife asking each other who she was and both responding they thought she was a part of the other's family. She wasn't a grandmother or aunt or neighbor or friend, just someone who found hope and consolation in children newly blessed and ready to face their future. That surely was what sustained her. She sounds a lot like the prophetess Anna in today's Gospel.

Here's the Good News for those who've just had a baby: You get to take home a bundle of love who will be the apple of your eye for years to come. It's like being born again yourself. Wonder will come to live at your house. Your lineage will continue. The world has a future. Who knows what this child will accomplish?

Here's the Bad News: This baby will cry, fill their diaper, and need you without mercy for years to come. This child arrives with a huge price tag: a commitment that costs dollars, time, privacy, personal goals, sleepless nights, and nonstop worry. There will be disappointments, grief, and rejection up ahead.

The news that Mary and Joseph got when they brought Jesus to the Temple that day was more extreme than usual. An old man they'd never met insisted their son would be a success story for his nation and a path for foreigners to follow. He would be a game-changer for the powerful and the voiceless alike. He would face great opposition and cause great suffering -- to his mother; the absence of his father in this prediction sounded ominous.

Meanwhile, at the sight of their baby, a prophetess immediately gave thanks for his life and began to tell everyone that God's ancient promises were about to come true. After Anna encounters Jesus, we hear that Jesus goes to Nazareth with his family, growing in strength and wisdom. Family homes are places of physical encounters. Moms and dads hugging kids, caring for them in their sickness, teaching them to perform household tasks. This is the mystery of family life taken up by the Word made flesh.

Jesus saves, therefore, not by abandoning the physical world, but entering more deeply into it. As Hebrews describes, since we're flesh and blood, who bleed and die, God enters that physical material condition through the Incarnation of the Son. He becomes the High Priest who offers back to the Father our flesh-and-blood lives.

He redeems us in the process. After all, this is the purpose of the Church. We're saved not when we recognize that Jesus is our savior. We're saved when our bodies are plunged into the baptismal waters of salvation, when our lips speak the words of the Holy Scripture, when we eat and drink Christ's Body and Blood, and when we adore Christ in the hungry and thirsty and homeless bodies of the poor.

According to the Church's liturgical calendar, the feast held on Feb. 2 each year is in honor of the Presentation of the Lord. Some Catholics recall this day as the feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary because such was the feast day named until the 1969 changes in the Church's calendar. It was also called the Feast of the Circumcision.

Under Mosaic Law found in the Old Testament Book of Leviticus, a Jewish woman who gave birth to a child was considered ritually unclean (see 12:1-8). Not morally unclean, not sinfully unclean, ritually unclean. The mother of a newborn could not routinely go out into public and had to avoid all things sacred, including the Temple. After a time, the woman presented herself at the Temple to be purified. If the baby was her firstborn male child, the infant was brought along to the Temple to be dedicated to the Lord.

My own mom remembers going to church after we were born to "be churched" – to receive a special blessing.

According to Luke's Gospel, the presentation of Jesus and the purification of the Blessed Mother took place in the Temple on the same day, and both are remembered during Mass on Feb. 2. Also, in several countries, including here, the feast of Candlemas is

simultaneously celebrated on this day and involves a blessing of candles, as we did today. In some countries, Feb. 2 ends the Christmas season. So, I guess it's time to finally take down my own Christmas decorations in the rectory! We started Ordinary Time last Sunday with the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord.

Last, but not least, Pope Francis has designated February 2nd as the World Day of Prayer for Consecrated Life. These are the men and women who belong to a specific religious congregation, like our own Sr. Pat Whalen. After suffering a catastrophic stroke in November of 2023, our own Sr. Pat had to relocate to the site of her motherhouse in Kalamazoo, the home base of the Congregation of St. Joseph. We were blessed to have her and her ministry with us for ten years. Sr. Pat is still alert, talking and praying for us to this day. Her left side is inactive, but she can still hold things in her right hand. She still has her beautiful smile, and is spreading the Light of Christ to those around her.

What are you waiting for to fulfill your life on earth?

What blessing gives you an entryway to an eternal relationship with God? How do YOU spread the Light of Christ to others?

May all of us be and become a similar light to break into the darkness of the world, "a light for all the nations." AMEN!

[Readings: Isaiah 6:1-2, 3-8; Ps. 138; 1 Cor. 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11]

HAPPY WORLD DAY OF MARRIAGE! I thank God for the married couples in our parish who witness to the presence of God in their lives, in their relationship, and in their children and grandchildren. They are fruitful when they live in the present and hope for the future. And they put the past in proper perspective.

The past can be a poison pill, a capsule of regret: for what we did, for what we failed to do. *We should have taken that job. We should have fought harder for that relationship.* When we dwell on yesterday, we revive old injuries and refresh old anger. *My parents never supported me. The system was against people like me.* We remember words that were said and can't be "un-said." *I shouldn't have called him a liar! They said I was a quitter, so I became one.* Or we relive old victories, longing for what was and can't be again. *I had such beautiful hair.* (I still do have beautiful hair. It's got a few gray hairs filling out. People say I look more distinguished!

A little girl noticed that her mom was getting gray and white strings of hair on her brunette head. The little girl asked, "Where do those hairs come from, Mommy? Seeing this a chance to make her child think, the mom said, "You know, honey, every time YOU do something bad, a gray or white hair shows up on MY head." The little girl thought for a moment and then observed, "You must have been a terrible child, Mommy, because Grandma's hair is all WHITE!"

Too often, living with the past comes down to living *in* the past. If we take this poison pill each new morning, it paralyzes the present, and dissolves the future in a haze of nostalgia. So we must refuse it.

We have to create a new habit. We have to reestablish the spirit we had as children, what's known as Beginner's Mind. Clean like a blank page. Open and receptive and eager to learn something new, to go in whatever direction becomes available.

This is how it was for Simon Peter that day at the lake. The Sea of Galilee was also called Gennesaret, "the Lake of the Garden of Riches," because it was surrounded by fertile land and a prosperous community that inhabited nine major towns. People who worked hard did well around there

Their chief occupations were fishing, farming, stone-masonry, and carpentry. But Peter isn't doing so well that day. A whole night given over to fishing and yet his nets are empty in the morning. He must have been tired and disappointed. Then a preacher from over in Nazareth asked to use Peter's boat as a platform from which to teach. Why not? It was certainly no use fishing with it.

Peter could have hunkered down in his boat that morning, closed down his heart, and surrendered himself to his failure the night before. He could have relived every hour -- every useless throw of the net -- every wrong decision made: location, direction, bait. He could have blamed his wife for sabotaging his attitude -- or perhaps his sick mother-in-law, whose medical condition distracted him.

He could have taken that poison pill marked "yesterday" and let it kill his spirit. Then Jesus asks him to take the boat out again and lower the nets.

If Peter was focused on yesterday, he would never have done it. If past failure was huge within him, he wouldn't have the courage.

But Peter said “no” to yesterday, and “yes” to today, placing all his hope in Jesus. It was a good decision!

The readings this week simply says: God does invite us, but we don't think we deserve it. In our First Reading, Isaiah gets to see God -- and live -- and receives his call directly from the heavenly court. In our Second Reading, Jesus Himself appears to the last person to whom you would have expected: His ugly ex-persecutor Paul. In the Gospel, Peter, along with the other two of the “Big Three” apostles, accepts their mission straight from Christ. Married couples have a mission to give witness.

And Paul admits that, “By the grace of God, I am what I am, and God's grace to me has not been ineffective.”

This is one of my favorite New Testament quotes. But I say it in the positive: “God's grace to me has been effective.”

Despite their protestations of inadequacy, these three are actually quite privileged and -- as it turned out -- ready to follow God completely. Three figures this week protest they are unworthy. Isaiah says, “I am a man of unclean lips.” Saint Paul says, “I am the least of the apostles.” Saint Peter says, “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.” Nonetheless, they are chosen to witness God's glory and advance God's mission.

Whoever you are, however unworthy you may feel, God has something important for you to do.

What is it? And what is holding you back? Find out for yourselves this week.

And remember: by the grace of God, you are what you are, and God's grace in you has been effective!

Say it with me: “By God’s grace... I am what I am... And God’s grace... has been effective in me.”

So, “do not be afraid,” because from this present day forward, YOU will be bringing people to the Lord, starting with yourself.

AMEN!

[Readings: Jer. 17: 5-8; Ps. 1; 1 Cor. 15:12, 16-20; Luke 6:17, 20-26]

There are two kinds of people, as the saying usually begins. And Scripture tends to bear this out with numerous points of comparisons between the just and the wicked, or the wise person and the fool. Today's readings cluster around the contrasting of those who are blessed versus those who are cursed.

Although such black-and-white distinctions seem harsh in our typically grey perception of reality, biblical language is quite clear that we must expect a time of foreclosure known as Judgment Day, when the chance to change our course, our life path, is behind us.

Many of us would certainly like to end the suspense and know as soon as possible, where we are going to end up for all eternity.

If you want to take your spiritual pulse right now, the prophet Jeremiah suggests, it's fairly easy. If you place your trust in people and things, you'll be sorry. If your trust is in God, you have nothing to fear. I have heard more than one person say. "I trust nobody."

The prophetic and wisdom traditions both agree that the issue of which side you're on is cut-and-dried. You're either a "barren bush in the desert that enjoys no change of season, but stands in a lava waste" (which can't be good), or you're a "tree planted beside the waters that shows no distress even in the year of drought" (which sounds much better). The only difference is whether your hope is rooted in God. All other distinguishing factors are meaningless.

So your accumulated stuff doesn't matter, and your good deeds won't make the grade.

You can't brown-nose your way through this one just because you go to church, behave yourself, and write a check to the missions once in a while. Ultimately, either you trust in this world, your personal and spiritual resources, and the good opinion of others, or you place your confidence in God.

What makes this *Good News* is that it's a path available to ANYONE and EVERYONE. Even the diehard sinner can do this and end up planted next to the saints in Heaven by that same stream of living water. This news tends to make us diehard sinners very happy, and everybody else a little disgruntled.

You mean, all that straight-and-narrow living doesn't buy any perks in the hereafter? You mean that God doesn't owe me anything for passing up some great near occasions of sin? Exactly. It all relies upon God's mercy and grace.

An old Arab proverb says: trust in God, but tie your camel. Trusting in God does not mean living like an idiot and taking foolish chances. Jesus advised his disciples, "You must be wise as serpents, and innocent as doves." He also said that if you build your house on sand, don't be surprised when it washes away. The word used here is not simply *sand*, but a veritable *wash*: Don't build your house where the water habitually comes, or you are asking for trouble!

Jesus took His own advice when He met the devil in the desert. The devil urges Him to throw Himself off a pinnacle and to trust that God would keep Him safe. That's not a working definition of trusting in God, Jesus assures Satan. That's called tempting God!

What Jesus means by trusting in God is evident in the listing of the Beatitudes. Those who trust in God live out of the conviction that

being poor, needy, sad, or despised NOW, is the smallest and least important part of the story. What awaits those who suffer these conditions faithfully now in this world is the day of restoration in the Kingdom of God.

Of course, the reverse is necessarily true. Those who are comfortable, content, and well-received NOW will be bitterly disappointed if they rely only and exclusively on their present happiness. In the Kingdom of God, those who counted on their own resources and self-sufficiency will find themselves poor and needy.

Somehow, our idea of trusting in God has been reduced to a vague sentimental feeling, a soft emotion we keep next to our lucky socks and our rabbit's foot. Or perhaps it's more like playing the heavenly stock market. None of us wastes time to put our trust in God while we are sitting in the waiting room at the hospital.

But if we don't get the results we wanted, we become outraged that God has been untrustworthy. This isn't trust: This is making just another worldly investment and anticipating a worldly outcome.

Saint Paul defines Christian hope down to precisely one element: our faith in the Resurrection of Jesus. Either it's real, or we're fools to share in the story of the Church. Either Christ has been raised, or death is the winner-take-all at the end of history. Confidence in the Risen One is the barometer of our trust in the Lord.

So... Do YOU believe? We say it every Sunday. We have to place all our hopes in the *big one*, the contest between death's finality and life unending. Because eternal life is the only thing worthy of our hope, when you come right down to it. Everything else goes to rust, moths, and decay, and in surprisingly short order.

If you don't believe that Jesus rose from the dead, then our faith is useless. You are wasting your time here. We are still stuck in the muck and mire of our sins. We are the most pitiful of all human beings! And the only path for all eternity for us is condemnation and Hell! (Have a nice day!) My Uncle Frank used to say, "I don't care where I end up – in Heaven or in Hell. I'll know people in both places! I wonder where HE ended up! I'm putting my money on Heaven!"

Those who trust in God are blessed, and those who don't get a bad case of "the woes." This isn't just God playing Santa Claus at the end-times, by the way: It's a reality check. If we trust in God, we get the eternal happiness that only God can offer. And if we cling to the world, we get the world, complete with its expiration date. God takes our free will very seriously. It would be good if we did, too, and examined our choices more carefully.

Practice forgiveness. Lose yourself serving others. Pray daily, early and often. Offer hospitality to others. Share your faith with others whose faith is alive. Take God's hand and walk together. This is how we trust. And how it will keep us green and growing. And ending up on the right side of eternity! AMEN!

[1 Sam 26:2, 7-9, 12-13, 22-23; Ps. 103; 1 Cor. 15:45-49; Lk 6:27-38]

Most of us have no quarrel with most of the teachings of Jesus. When He says love one another and welcome little children, and peace I leave with you, we find nothing difficult or objectionable in these sayings. Most of what Jesus has to say sounds like good moral advice or happy and reassuring thoughts. We're content to call Him Lord and follow his way when that way is congenial to the way we already want to go.

However, in the time of Jesus there were plenty of folks who were pleased to leave their jobs (which they didn't much care for anyway) and follow Him around (which occasionally led to a free lunch) and listen to His teachings (which confirmed what they already believed about rich people and religious leaders in general). And they continued to do so until they ran hard up against the so-called "harsh sayings" of Jesus, which were so displeasing that most of His followers turned on their heels and went home harrumphing about Him after that.

When Jesus tells us to be like the lilies and don't worry so much, we sigh and think it's a lovely idea. But when Jesus says love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, and bless those who curse you, what are we to make of that? For some of us, at least, these sayings are so ridiculous and impossible to take seriously that we have to presume they've lost something in the translation. When Jesus says "enemies," He doesn't really mean the people who intend us harm, Does He?

And when He talks about “doing good” to people who hate us, surely He implies not actually being kind or thoughtful or helpful to them. After all, it’s the very definition of an enemy to be the person who’s out to get you, and such a person is to be avoided or defeated at all costs. In certain cases, such a person should even be killed, we reason. So Jesus can’t mean love your enemies. He must mean something else! Right? No, He doesn’t!

We have grown used to qualifying and limiting our responsibility to the holy will of God. For example, when we practice compassion, we tend to reserve it for those who “deserve” our compassion. Such people who were not responsible for the choices and the circumstances of their misfortune, right?

So we may extend compassion to a person who is ill because of exposure to asbestos, but not to a smoker who has lung cancer. We show mercy to the hurricane victim, but not to the alcoholic who has developed diabetes.

We may do the same with our forgiveness. We may forgive people who have wronged us, and confessed their behavior, and worked to amend the damage, but not the person who never says he or she is sorry. When we qualify our responses in this way, we are practicing human justice, but we are not imitating the Lord who felt compassion for the people of Jerusalem who would shout for His crucifixion the next day, or who forgave those who were in the act of putting Him to death because they were so ignorant.

When we practice human justice, expecting an eye for an eye, loving our friends and hating our enemies, repaying people in kind for what they do, nothing is accomplished according to the reign of God.

The reign of God is extended when God's will is done and something truly divine is allowed to come to life among us. Heavenly justice is so much grander than just evening out the score; it enlarges our own hearts and vision when we have the courage to participate in it.

What would it have gained David to seize the moment and destroy his enemy Saul while he slept? It would have solved a problem he had, surely. It would have eliminated a man who was bent on killing him. But David has been anointed by a prophet to be a king, and that means he has to show a kingly sensibility about the origins and privileges of power.

Knowing that a king rules by divine decree and not his own pleasure, David honors King Saul even in this dangerous hour. In turn, Saul perceives that David is indeed greater, more kingly, and more deserving of divine favor than he is himself. David grows in stature and grace in the eyes of his men, and even under the steady gaze of his enemy. David wins more than the life of his enemy in this encounter. But he cannot resist the irony of literally catching Saul with his pants down, and teasing him about having his kingly spear!

The only way we, too, can grow and expand in grace and knowledge of the ways of God is to practice them. When we do, the kingdom Jesus announced "leans" into view and into our reality.

Daily life offers countless opportunities to put this Sunday's gospel into practice. Can I think of one clear-cut example from the past week in which I've loved an enemy or done good to someone who hates me? How about a recent time when I failed to do that?

Loving others does not mean being available for abuse. What have I learned in my life about being loving, even in the midst of

conflict? Are there people in your life you have considered to be your enemies? If so, how have dealt with them?

Have you been able in some way to treat them in a loving way, despite what they may have done to you? Are you carrying any resentment, bitterness, or ill-will toward them? If so, what can you do to let go of that resentment, the bitterness, the ill-will?

We have to remember that love, compassion, and forgiveness are not about what we FEEL but how we CHOOSE. These are divine attributes and as such do not properly belong to us.

Even Jesus didn't say, "I forgive you," to His enemies from the cross; He asked God to forgive them. For God does indeed love those who have set themselves against God's own divine will; God does have mercy on those unworthy of compassion; and God does forgive those who are unforgivable.

Let's not pray for God to forgive us as WE forgive, but to forgive as GOD forgives! AMEN!