

[Readings: Jer 33:14-16; Psalm 25; 1 Thess 3:12-4:2; Luke: 21:25-28, 34-36]

That was a cheery Gospel, wasn't it?

The season of Advent which we begin today, celebrates the three arrivals ("Adventus" means arrival or coming) of Jesus Christ. His first arrival to us was in human history. He also comes to us now in the mystery of our sacraments, especially in the Eucharist. His arrival in divine majesty and glory at the end of time is what we focus on for the first part of our Advent journey.

Our waiting for the festival of Christmas deepens our preparation for Christ's return in glory. But Advent is also a time of God's waiting. God is waiting for us -- to prepare our hearts, to prepare our minds, to prepare our lives, to prepare our homes for the arrival of God's only Son, Jesus Christ, in the Eucharist of Christmas and at the end of time.

Jesus tells us what to do in today's Gospel: "Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life" (Luke 21:34). More teens and young adults are indulging in alcohol, drug abuse and sexual immorality. The age of alcohol, drug and sex abuse is now junior high or even earlier. One half of all live births in our country are to unwed mothers. Socially transmitted diseases are at an all-time high among younger people. But there is a growing "holy remnant" of young people rising up with a new spiritual hunger and a spiritual revival. Some of them are in this parish.

Adults don't get away without guilt or shame. Hundreds of thousands of adults are turning to gambling, compulsive shopping and Internet pornography to fill the emotional holes in their hearts to the point of turning these vices into billion dollar industries. There is more mental illness in our country than in any other country or at any time in our nation's history. And I am speaking about the lack of self-worth, the lack of self-esteem, the lack of self-respect, the anxiety of spreading ourselves too thin, and the pressures that society and our culture puts on us to pull us away from God, from religion, and from our moral and ethical centers. These are the ways of thinking, speaking and acting that weaken our spiritual house from within and make us a less worthy temple for the Holy Spirit.

St. Paul tells us in our Second Reading how to combat this downward spiral of self-destruction and anxiety. As we increase and abound in genuine love and respect for ourselves and for one another and for all, we grow stronger in our life of discipleship. This is the “home improvement” that God rejoices in and brings to completion, in God’s time and in God’s way, for each of us and for the Church as a whole. Does your life and work “abound in love” for others?

Waiting is never a passive enterprise. It always involves commitment on our part. For those of you who are parents, do you remember the last month of your pregnancy before your son or daughter was born? What was that last month like for you and your spouse? You were “Preparing the Way!”

Last-minute preparations for a new arrival. Baby clothes, a crib, a changing table, baby formula and baby food. A new space for the baby to sleep and to play. Teaching older siblings how to welcome the New Arrival.

Would any of us call the pizza man for a delivery and then fail to be home when the pizza arrives? Would we invite a guest to dinner and then be surprised -- and unprepared -- when they show up? Would we place an order from a catalogue or through the internet and then protest when the credit card payment comes due? When we say we are waiting for something, we can’t live as if we are waiting for nothing. Our waiting is a dedication. Our Advent waiting dedicates us to the Christ Who is eternally on the way.

What impact does the coming of the Lord have on your daily life? What distracts you from being prepared for his coming? How can you keep these distractions from getting in the way of encountering God?

My friends, our personal “end time” will come when death claims our own mortal bodies. The visions of today’s Gospel could easily describe our own death. The sun and the stars will be darkened by our own closing eyelids. The world we live in will slip away as we lose the use of our bodily functions.

The chaos and despair of this world may cause us to faint from fear. As people of faith, we remember that what the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the Master calls a butterfly. Our salvation indeed is near. Come, Lord Jesus!

[Readings: Micah 5:1-4a; Psalm 80; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45]

I have mentioned many times that the Church in her wisdom always has a deep theological reason and then a simple, practical reason for doing what she does and why things are. My first Advent here ten years ago, someone asked about the blue hangings in church. Why blue? I said, "Because it symbolizes the changing sky, the setting sun with its purple, rose and blue colors, signaling the darkness of winter and the arrival of the Light of the World on Christmas." They bought it! The practical reason for the blue? "We ran out of purple material!"

A hymn we sing during Advent is: "People look east. The time is near." As Christmas approaches, our Advent hymn tells us where to direct our attention: to the east. Why there?

The east is the sunrise place, the place where each new day begins when the sun comes up. It is the place where the Garden of Eden was: Adam and Eve lived in a garden east of Eden. It is the place where the Magi set out to see the Christ Child. It is the place where Christ's return in glory was expected.

In a sense, the Church is always standing on tiptoe and straining her eyes eastward as she longs for the final coming of Christ. When churches were built, for centuries the historical tradition was to place the altar facing east, so when the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is offered, the priest and the people are facing east. This church has the altar facing east, but since Vatican II, the presider now faces west! So you, the people still honor a centuries-old tradition.

The night watchmen on the walls of ancient Jerusalem looked eagerly to the east for the first glimmering of the dawn so that their shift would end and they could punch out and go home. When Christ returns at the end of time, His radiant light will once and for all dispel the darkness that still fills our hearts, our minds and our souls. "East," the place of reborn light and fresh beginnings, is where we shall glimpse God's salvation, just as Elizabeth glimpsed it when her cousin Mary visited her, as we heard in today's Gospel. "East" is where the prophet Micah looked, for that is where the people of Israel had been exiled.

Micah rejoiced to know that it was in their midst that God would be revealed as a shepherd leading God's people home and who would be their peace forever. That God is our shepherd and our peace today.

We sing that same hope in today's Responsorial Psalm refrain: "Lord, make us turn to You. Show us Your Face and we shall be saved." For us, looking eastward is looking God-ward, as we welcome God's light in Jesus Christ that scatters the darkness in our lives. We look God-ward for the vision and the strength to do the will of God, as Jesus did.

As our reading from the Letter to the Hebrews puts it: "Behold, I come to do your will, O God." Mary said it in our readings twelve days ago: "May it be done to me according to Your word." We join Mary and Elizabeth in looking eastward, looking God-ward if we are to serve God and each other faithfully and joyfully.

During these Advent days, we pray that when we leave here during these final few days of preparation for Christmas, we can be a light in the mounting darkness, evil and sin in the world, pointing others to the east by our acts of kindness and our words of peace. "People, look east. The time is near."

Come, Lord Jesus! AMEN!

[Is. 62: 1-5, Acts 13: 16-17, 22-25 / Is. 9:1-6; Titus 2:11-14 / Is. 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. “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.

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 a sign of hope.

Also, I have had parishioners ask me as Christmas was approaching this month, to share with all of you a Christmas homily which I gave almost ten years ago. They still remember it. It is called “Everything you need is in this House.” Here goes...

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 living room of 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 two houses I lived in – one as an infant, the other until I left for college -- and the various rectories I've lived in over forty 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 living saints, giving us an example of living our faith, even in the midst of darkness. Where sin abounds, grace far surpasses it.

As the younger members of the family scramble up the stairs, photos and photo 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. As our National Eucharistic Revival continues in its

third year, please accept “33 Days to Eucharistic Glory.”

Let the Holy Spirit stop you at a chapter, a sentence or a word which speaks to your soul. Spend some time with Jesus Christ this Christmas. 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. On December 8<sup>th</sup>, Our Holy Father Pope Francis opened the Holy Door at St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome and declared a Jubilee Year of Mercy. He challenges each one of us to be recipients of mercy and to be messengers of mercy. He challenges each one of us to do an honest self-assessment of our lives and to seek forgiveness where it is needed in the Sacrament of Confession, Penance and Reconciliation.

Then we are called to accept the challenge to be agents of mercy to others. To offer in love the gift of mercy and forgiveness to those who need it from us, and to 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; Ps.128; Col.3:12-21; Luke 2:41-52]

Have you ever lost something that's really important to you, 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, their kid isn't there, 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? Mary saying to Joseph, "I thought He was with YOU!" Joseph saying in return: "I thought He was with YOU!" Then they both look up to the sky in fear and desperation and hear a mighty voice thundering: "And I thought I left Him with BOTH OF YOU!"

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 kind of 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 a shred of anxiety. In fact, we may be downright indifferent. And that's when 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 finally find Him – after THREE DAYS of hunting and searching-- in the temple.

He is sitting among the teachers, listening to them, and asking them questions, and all who heard Him were amazed at HIS understanding and His answers. According to most police reports, most lost children are found within three days. From three to ten days, the search and rescue mission changes and becomes a search and recovery mission. So, what do we see here?

We see that 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. Maybe over the years, Jesus leaves his parents astonished, but this is in the privacy of their home.

Parents, have you ever had the experience of something profound coming from the lips of your children? And then you proudly ask, "Did my kid say that?" Recognize that wisdom sometimes comes out of the mouths of your children.

During one of the Christmas Masses here at St. Martin de Porres, the Communion Rite was different. Usually I have the longest lines and am the last one to finish giving out Holy Communion. At that Mass, I finished early, and turned around on my stool to help those in the side aisle. Two ministers were already in that aisle, but there still were twenty or thirty people coming up to receive.

I sat alone with nobody in my line, when a little girl, probably in the fourth or fifth grade, left the line and came over to me. She said to me, "You looked lonely, so I came over to keep you company."

She smiled and held out her hands to receive. "Out of the mouths of babes," right?

Back to Jesus. 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 to them, "How is it that you sought me, did you not know that I would be in my father's house?" For the past three generations at least that I have been alive, Mary's question is asked in a much more colorful language by my own parents:

"What the heck's the matter with you?" "Why did you go away?" "Where are your brains?"

I remember vividly when one of us kids ended up lost and eventually was found, my Mom much later confessed when we were adults, "I didn't know whether to hug you, or beat you to a pulp!"

Back to Jesus. Why was it incredibly natural to Him to take a detour into the Temple while the caravan went home? Because Jesus, in His essence, is God, and God cannot be lost. So, Jesus wasn't thinking, "I'm lost," because God cannot 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 not be lost. He wasn't lost. He didn't feel lost. He was calm. He was not anxious. He wasn't lost.

The two tragic family patterns that most concern me as a pastor are these: married couples where the spouses are on two different spiritual levels. One of them hasn't grown spiritually since their Confirmation Day. The other tragedy is much more common; parents

and grandparents whose adult children and adult grandchildren no longer live out their Catholic faith inside the church and outside.

Sometimes in our lives, when we think something or someone else is lost, the reality is that WE might be the ones that are lost. WE are the ones that have lost something. Mary and Joseph had lost something. Families are messy bundles of congealed emotions. When the heat of bodies gathered for a family meal is applied, resentments bubble to the surface and tempers flare.

Saint Paul has the perfect recipe for just such occasions: "Put on heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another."

Wow, what family couldn't use a reminder to be bear with the conspiracy theorists in our midst; patient with the embellishments and meanderings of some of our storytellers; forgiving of all the barbs and digs that invariably get tossed in our direction, some in good fun, some not.

Today's Gospel message is an invitation to renew that search for God and for a deeper Catholic Faith 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 actively, intentionally.

And then it's just so easy to become average, and mediocre, and lukewarm in all things spiritual. And Satan once again chuckles, brushes his hands and moves on to his next victim.

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?

Check out the Scripture citations for today's three readings. Sit down as a family and discuss them today or sometime this week. How does your family measure up to what the Word of God does is calling you to be? What are YOUR relationships like?

Our Catholic teaching says that every household is a domestic church, a "mini-church," just as we have mini-marts and mini-malls. 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 those tools wisely. All of us have the finest role model possible to whom we can appeal: Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Happy hunting! AMEN!