

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

It's said that in Rome, on New Year's Eve, there is a tradition of literally throwing old things right out the window, to start the New Year free from the past. I guess the moral of that is, if you are fortunate enough to be in Rome, Italy some New Year's Eve, you best keep an eye skyward. Somebody might be throwing out a heavy piece of furniture just as you are passing by. That's their tradition.

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It's also a tradition in Mexico. People purchase an array of very inexpensive pottery, mostly simple clay plates in the town square. What is interesting is that people were buying these simple clay plates and then standing back and throwing them with full force against one wall of the great cathedral in the community square, smashing the plates into smithereens.

This tradition grew out of a deep human need to throw out the old, to start the New Year free of old resentments, old fears, old prejudices, old sins. The motto of the day is "Throw them out! Let them smash against the strong fortress of faith and be done with it. God is ready to offer healing and new life."

On a day devoted to both Mary and praying for 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 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, for both yourself and the world. But don't only pray; do something to help bring peace to conflict.

The Feast of the Holy Family, usually the Sunday between Christmas and New Year's, was moved to last Friday because Christmas fell on Sunday this year.

The Second Reading for the Feast of the Holy Family fits in perfectly for today's Feast of Mary the Mother of God, and the World Day of Prayer for Peace.

How should we behave as a biological family, as an adoptive family, a Family of Parishes and as a worldwide human family? Here is what St. Paul writes:

“Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

Most families have not had a perfect record of love and holiness, of thanksgiving and praise. That's when these words of St. Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, must touch our broken hearts and broken lives. To break the chains and the cycle of trauma and abuse, and to give witness to a home and a heart at peace. Are you ready to throw out the old, to start the New Year free of old resentments, old fears, old prejudices, old sins? The motto of the day is "Throw them out! Let them smash against the strong fortress of faith and be done with it. God is ready to offer healing and new life."

After trying everything else, Shelly was present for her first Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. Skeptical and listening half-heartedly at first, the words of Martha caught her attention. Martha told the group, "I just knew that I could handle alcohol and my other problems on my own, but I couldn't.

“Seven years ago I came to my first A.A. meeting and since that time I have grown as a person beyond anything I could have ever imagined.”

Martha exuded confidence and depth. She spoke of a power "higher than I," the God of Jesus Christ, and the way in which God now lived at the center of her life. Her words oozed with sincere encouragement and concern. Most of all, Martha exhibited a thankfulness which words could not express.

Shelly, who came to the meeting doubtful that anything she would hear would change the way she felt or thought, made her way to Martha when the meeting was over. "I want what you have," Shelly told Martha, "I want what you have." Shelly wanted the compassion, depth, and hope, which Martha knew, but she may not have realized fully how Martha came to know those things.

Martha learned compassion from a time of deep personal suffering. She acquired spiritual depth from hours of praying when there was nowhere else to turn. She discovered hope by taking one step at a time because "one day at a time" was too much to be expected.

This is my vision, my dream, my hope for each one of you: to have what we have and then to share what we have with others. I conclude with our Archdiocesan Prayer for your families, for our Family of Parishes and for the worldwide family of humanity:

*Father in Heaven, renew your wonders in our time,  
as though by a New Pentecost.  
Holy Spirit, increase your gifts in us to move boldly into  
Families of Parishes with confidence.  
Deepen our desire for every person to encounter Jesus anew,  
grow daily as his disciples and give witness to his love and mercy.  
This is our mission! And we embrace it anew.  
Grant that your Holy Church in Detroit,  
praying perseveringly and insistently with one mind,  
together with Mary, the mother of Jesus, and  
guided by St. Joseph, St. Anne and Bl. Solanus Casey,  
may increase the reign of the Divine Savior,  
the reign of truth and justice, the reign of love and peace.  
We ask this through Christ Our Lord. Amen*

Our Lady, Queen of Peace, pray for us! AMEN!

**ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE PASSING OF POPE EMERITUS BENEDICT XVI**

As most of you have heard, **Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI passed**

**into eternal life** at 9:34 AM this morning/yesterday in Rome.

As pope, cardinal, and theologian, Benedict XVI embodied the role of “servant of the servants of God.”

Americans had a special reason to love Benedict XVI, affectionately called “our German shepherd.” He challenged us to reflect deeply on the meaning of human freedom... and to resist the “dictatorship of relativism.”

His words were prophetic:

*“We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s own ego and desires.”*

~Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, [Opening Homily of the 2005 Papal Conclave](#)

Born as totalitarian regimes – including Nazism and communism – swept through Europe, he offered us a shining example of a true Christian response to tyranny and moral confusion: with faith, hope, and commitment to the dignity of the human person grounded in authentic freedom.

We pray for the repose of his soul and that his witness might inspire us to be equally courageous and prophetic brothers and sister Jesus Christ in the service of Holy Mother Church and the proclamation of the Truth of our Catholic teachings and practices.

**Well done, good and faithful servant.**

May his soul and those of the faithful departed rest in peace. AMEN!

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

How far will YOU go?

The Feast of the Epiphany shows the fullness of the revelation not only to the Jews, but to the non-Jews, the Gentiles and to all the nations. We see not only our journey to God, but the great journey of God to us. The humility by and the great lengths which Jesus has taken to come to be among us and to show Himself to us, and the great lengths He will continue to take in His three years of public ministry which will lead to His passion, death and Resurrection. Of course, He is most near to us in the Most Blessed Sacrament of the Altar.

As we see the greatness of Jesus' journey to us, as we reflect on the greatness of the journey of the Magi, what are the ways that the Holy Spirit is moving US to continue OUR great journey, in this life and the life to come? What gifts do WE bring this day to the stable and place before the Lord and King? 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 it before the Lord. How far will YOU go?

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 great 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, we will suffer at times and eventually we all will die, but our lives will have meaning because we will have lived it for the sake of others. We will find immense happiness in sharing our 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.

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.

The Magi -- were they wise men, astrologers, magicians, priests, royalty? Who knows what the Magi were? Raymond Arroyo, in his most recent book, "Wise Men Who Found Christmas," says that the astrologers did not come from the East, as our Gospel story says, but from the north, from Persia. They dabbled in astrology, magic (that's where we get the term "Magi" from) and theology. They interpreted dreams and came from the royal class, hence the name "We Three Kings." They may have only been foreign ambassadors.

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, good tax collectors like Matthew, and converted 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? Wise men still seek Him!

Raymond Arroyo says that the area in Persia and the city in which the Wise Men lived, Petra, were great producers and sellers of gold, incense and myrrh. This is probably why the Three Wise Men brought these to Baby Jesus.

We too must bring our gold. A king’s crown is usually made of gold. Jesus is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. 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 as creatures before God, incomplete before the Creator of the cosmos.

We too must bring our frankincense. Frankincense is burned, producing the most pleasing of odors. It is usually offered to honor the Divine, to honor God.

Jesus is truly God and truly human. 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 too must bring our myrrh. Myrrh is a fragrant oil used in the preparation of dead bodies for their funerals. 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 dying to our desire for power and prestige. The Greek word is *ascesis*. That's where we get the word *ascetical* and the phrase *the ascetical life*. A lifestyle which involves a daily dying to oneself in humility to God's holy will for us.

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.

- What more can I do to bring light to darkness in my own spirit as well as the hearts and minds of those around me?
- Epiphany is a kind of "second Christmas." What "gifts" do I have to offer, and how can I best use them? Do I do everything I can to welcome people, just as the Magi from the East were welcomed at the cradle of the infant Jesus?

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! Not liking ME?

John the Baptist 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. He KNEW Jesus, but he did not UNDERSTAND Him and His true mission.

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. Even up to his last days on this earth, in prison, John sends his disciples to Jesus to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?”

Do WE ask that same question once in a while? Where are you, Lord?

So, we see that John hesitates both when Jesus presents Himself for Baptism and again later on while he is under arrest and beginning to wonder if Jesus is the right Messiah.

Some scripture scholars theorize that when Jesus was in the desert for forty days, that John and some of John’s followers joined them.

That way, and during the three years of the public ministry of Jesus, John's faith grew from the time he surrendered further to the divine agenda in baptizing Jesus to the day he was prepared to truly understand Him as the Paschal Lamb, the Lamb of God.

Jesus is "the light to the nations." The Gospel is quick to distinguish the true light from the lamp bearer. 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. You and I are called to be light-bearers to the Light of the World.

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 continuing novel. 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. Paul's learning curve was unusually steep, and he raised the light of Christ high enough for the Gentile world to see it. You and I are called and chosen to be Light to the Nations, III.

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; 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, 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!

[Readings: Zephaniah 2:3, 3:12-13; Psalm 146; 1 Cor 1:26-31; Matt 5:1-12a]

We Christians often count our many blessings in these categories: family, a nice home, friendships that enable us to flourish, a good job, financial security. But it is the strange Christian who says, I count as blessings poverty of spirit, mourning the condition of our world, and the existence of persecution. Yet, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus reveals to us the strangeness of blessings in the Kingdom of God.

Matthew 5 begins by locating Jesus' preaching geographically: "He went up a mountain" (Mt 5:1). For us modern readers, this may seem like an unimportant detail. But in the history of Israel, God reveals things on mountains. In the Book of Exodus, Moses receives the Law on the mountaintop.

Jesus speaks this Law in a different way. For Him, the Law was never merely a series of commands that led Israel to fear God's punishment. Instead, the Law is that which sets Israel apart as the chosen people who walk in the way of the Lord. Thus, what now we refer to as the Beatitudes in the Gospel of Matthew serve as the foundation of this remnant identity as citizens in the Kingdom of Heaven. Which Beatitude speaks most powerfully to you today?

These Beatitudes are not simply a matter of behavior modification. For Jesus alone is the One who can live these Beatitudes perfectly as the Word made Flesh. Jesus reveals in the Sermon on the Mount what we must become to belong to the Church. We must become like Jesus, our very Lord. It is much easier to WORSHIP Jesus Christ than to BECOME like Jesus Christ!

Let the Holy Spirit make the connection and the transition between both worshipping Jesus and becoming more like Jesus!

Simply pray this: "Please, Lord, help me to spread your word." At the time, we didn't know what the prayer may have fully meant, or where it would lead us. That will be revealed in time. And that is the beauty of Jesus' call. Rather than assign specific jobs to each of us, Jesus accompanies us on our journey and shows us how our desired vocation can serve God's reign.

Open to the Holy Spirit, we discover where Jesus wants us to be and what Jesus wants us to do. And whom does He call? St. Paul tells us in today's Second Reading: God calls not the powerful and those of noble birth. God calls the foolish, the weak, the lowly and despised to give God's wisdom in order to do the work of the Kingdom. How many of us fit that bill? Are YOU foolish, weak, lowly and despised by a few others? I know that I am one of them!

As one biblical commentator put it: "Jesus invites carpenters to build His temple, physicians to heal immortal souls, merchants to invest in pearls of great price," and fishers to become fishers of souls in service to God.

As we grow in faith, our daily work doesn't necessarily change, but our intention and purpose do. Like the spirit-filled first disciples, we strive to spread God's word in whatever we do.

This is my vision, my dream, my hope for each one of you. It is ambitious. To re-discover and to deepen our beautiful Catholic faith, to celebrate what we have, and then to share what we have with others. In other words, the words of our parish mission: To strive, to celebrate and to serve. Are you with me???

I close with a prayer composed by St. Thomas Aquinas, whose feast day is this weekend:

"Grant me, O Lord my God,  
a mind to know you,  
a heart to seek you,  
Wisdom to find you,  
conduct pleasing to you,  
faithful perseverance in waiting for you,  
and a hope of finally embracing you."

AMEN!