

[Readings: Numbers.6:22-27; Ps.67; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:16-21]

Pope Francis issued his annual message for today's Feast of the Mother of God, and the World Day of Peace. The message:

"Forgive us our trespasses: grant us your peace."

Pope Francis calls on all nations to eliminate the death penalty, to divert a fixed percentage of arms spending to a global fund to promote the education of the young, to fight hunger and climate change, and to cancel the international debt of developing nations as concrete ways to usher in a new era of hope.

The pope made these three proposals for bringing about "much-needed changes" during the newly-begun Jubilee Year, which focuses on "Pilgrims of Hope." The proposals, he wrote, are "capable of restoring dignity to the lives of entire peoples and enabling them to set out anew on the journey of hope."

The *first proposal*, he wrote, is renewing the appeal launched by St. John Paul II for the Holy Year 2000 to consider "reducing substantially, if not canceling outright, the international debt which seriously threatens the future of many nations."

Foreign debt, Pope Francis wrote, "has become a means of control whereby certain governments and private financial institutions of the richer countries unscrupulously and indiscriminately exploit the human and natural resources of poorer countries, simply to satisfy the demands of their own markets."

Pope Francis also said wealthier nations must recognize their own "ecological debt" to the global south due to the exploitation of resources, the destruction of ecosystems and the effects of climate

change. "The more prosperous countries ought to feel called to do everything possible to forgive the debts of those countries that are in no condition to repay the amount they owe."

The pope's *second proposal* is for "a firm commitment" to respecting "the dignity of human life from conception to natural death, so that each person can cherish his or her own life and all may look with hope to a future of prosperity and happiness for themselves and for their children."

"Without hope for the future, it becomes hard for the young to look forward to bringing new lives into the world," he wrote. And a "concrete gesture that can help foster the culture of life" is the elimination of the death penalty in all nations. The death penalty "not only compromises the inviolability of life but eliminates every human hope of forgiveness and rehabilitation."

The pope's *third appeal* follows "in the footsteps of St. Paul VI and Benedict XVI. In this time marked by wars, let us use at least a fixed percentage of the money earmarked for armaments to establish a global fund. The fund should finance initiatives "to eradicate hunger" and facilitate educational activities in poor countries to promote sustainable development and combat climate change.

Pope Francis said in his message that the jubilee tradition is meant to remind all people, "rich and poor alike, that no one comes into this world doomed to oppression: all of us are brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of the same Father, born to live in freedom, in accordance with the Lord's will."

Christians "feel bound to cry out and denounce the many situations in which the earth is exploited and our neighbors oppressed," he wrote.

Calling for and implementing concrete solutions to systemic injustice is part of the Christian desire to "break the bonds of injustice and to proclaim God's justice."

"Forgive us our trespasses: grant us your peace."

Will YOU become "Pilgrims of Hope?" May this Jubilee Year be one of mercy and forgiveness and peace for all of us.

Holy Mary, Mother of God and Queen of Peace, pray for us!

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

How many of you have made a “pilgrimage” in your lifetime – going on a long journey to a sacred place that is important to one’s belief and faith? For some it is Rome or Lourdes or the Holy Land; for others it is Graceland, Dollywood, or the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto.

Back in June of 1982, only one month after my priestly ordination, I travelled to California and stayed with a friend of mine. The visit included a tour/pilgrimage to Universal Studios in Hollywood. There I found and touched the side of one of the three DeLorean cars which were used for the movie trilogy, “Back to the Future.” AND I got the autograph of Walter Koenig, who played Chekov on the original Star Trek TV series. He signed a souvenir clipboard which I used to compose my homilies for the first ten years of my priesthood. This was before computers, when I had to hand-write all of my homilies! He wrote: “Wishing you the best of all worlds... And I’m sure you know which one that is!” Isn’t that a wonderful gift from a famous actor to a newly-ordained priest?

A pilgrimage involves both time and space. It involves traveling from one location to another, generally of some distance, usually over a long period of time. For the pilgrim, the travel time can offer an opportunity for prayer and reflection, and the distance often requires penance and pain of some kind, even if the mode of transportation is convenient. Looking over the brochures for a tour of the Holy Land with a seminarian friend, many of them said, “Walk along the actual footsteps of Jesus.” Then I saw a brochure that said this:

“RIDE along the footsteps of Jesus in air-conditioned comfort.”
Now THAT’S my kind of pilgrimage!

Many pilgrims have told me that the journey itself was just as important as reaching the destination. Stories are shared. Songs are sung. There is laughter and tears along the way. You do not journey alone. Companions are met. Friendships are formed.

Pilgrimages have been with us for centuries, even for thousands of years. Universally, we are still called a “Pilgrim Church” still on the move!

“Magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem.” The Magi were “wise men,” Non-Jewish men who combined astronomy and astrology to find religious insights from the skies. Here is another example of faith and science informing each other. Faith and reason CAN co-exist!

THE star of Bethlehem attracts the magi and leads them to find its meaning. But for them to really find out who Jesus is, they must first learn about Him from the Jewish scripture -- the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem.

The Magi symbolize several things: the need for revelation to inform natural knowledge; the Gentiles’ willingness to accept Jesus as the Messiah; and the pilgrimages of religious seekers who set out on long, risky, and uncertain journeys to find the source of their faith.

Why did Herod want the Christ Child dead? Because the little one “away in a manger” was being called the “King of the Jews,” a title reserved for Herod himself. Anyone contesting that title was a considered a political rival – an enemy who had to be eliminated.

But we find out that it is God, not Rome, who designates the Messiah-King, and that though He first appears among the Jews, Gentiles also welcome the revelation, the “Epiphany” of their true ruler.

Do you remember seeing the three Wise Men as Caucasian, Black and Oriental? This is another way of saying that all people of all races are sons and daughters of God, not just the Jewish “Chosen People.” ALL are created in God’s image, and worthy of salvation!

Wise men still seek him today. That would be you and me!

Ponder these questions this week:

How is YOUR pilgrimage going? How are you learning more about your faith, about Jesus Christ, and about yourself in the process? Has your faith journey sometimes been long, risky, and uncertain? Is God leading you along “a different route” as He detoured the astrologers from the east?

Today’s Feast of the Epiphany is about the divine mysteries becoming known, understood and believed by you and me. And then WE become a light of faith and hope for others. AMEN!

[Readings: Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7; Ps. 104; Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-7;
Luke 3:15-16, 21-22]

Before celebrating his first group Baptism of babies, a newly-ordained priest took special care to make sure everything was ready: his book of the rite, the oils, the candles, the cotton swabs, the small white linen towels. The whole Baptism ceremony seemed to go smoothly.

He got all eight of the children's names right without a cue card. But as he was getting ready to read the concluding prayer, one of the grandmothers touched his sleeve and whispered gently, "You forgot to pour the holy water on the babies."

Sacraments have always been communal events. Luke sets the scene of Jesus' Baptism in our Gospel today by first describing the crowd: "The people were filled with expectation." John the Baptist and Jesus Himself are not mentioned in the first words of today's Gospel: "The people were filled with enthusiasm." Everything we understand about sacraments tells us that it was the presence of the crowd – their energy and anticipation for what was to unfold, the prayers and wonderings held fervently in each heart – that allowed the flow of God's grace to be made manifest in Jesus. Remember those times when Jesus visited villages but could perform no miracles or healing there, because of the lack of faith of the people? In today's passage, there is great expectation.

My priest and organist friends comment that at some Funeral Masses, the crowd is so silent and non-participatory, the priest cannot tell who is deader: the crowd or the body in the casket!

You and I can and must enter every sacramental experience as full, conscious, and active participants, ready to be conduits for the flow of grace that God is continually pouring out. The celebrant leads, the presider presides.

But the members of the community are essential, adding their prayers and enthusiasm to the proceedings. Thank you for doing every time we gather each week for Sunday Mass. Your presence, your participation and your prayer all inspire me.

The Liturgy last week revealed the mystery of God's plan -- that in Jesus Christ, the Anointed, the Messiah -- all peoples, symbolized by the Magi, have been made "coheirs" to the blessings promised to Israel. This week, we're shown how we claim our inheritance.

Jesus doesn't submit to John's baptism as a sinner in need of forgiveness and purification. He humbles Himself to pass through Jordan's waters in order to lead a new "exodus" -- opening up not only the Promised Land on earth, but the Promised Land of Heaven so that all peoples can hear the words pronounced over Jesus today, words once reserved only for Israel and its king: that each of us is a beloved son or daughter of God.

Jesus is the chosen servant Isaiah prophesies in today's First Reading, anointed with the Spirit to make things right and just on earth. God puts His Spirit upon Jesus to make Him "a covenant of the people," -- the word "Covenant" is heard in the consecration prayer of the wine at Mass -- the liberator of the captives, the light to the nations.

Jesus, in today's alternate Second Reading from the Letter to Titus tells us, is the long- expected One in Israel, "anointed . . . with the Holy Spirit and power."

In our First Reading, Isaiah praises and lifts up the Lord's servant, in Whom He is well pleased and upon Whom He has put His Spirit. But that is also each one of us on the day of our own baptism.

God has formed each one of us, grasps you and me by the hand as a light for the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring spiritual prisoners out of confinement, to be a light those who live in darkness. My favorite passage from the Book of Isaiah is 61:1 – words repeated by Jesus as He begins His public ministry. The same words apply to you and me. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach Good News to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, and to release prisoners from the darkness. To proclaim a year of favor from the poor."

Time for you and me to get busy!

Titus lists the benefits of our baptism. God saves us, gives us rebirth and renewal of the Holy Spirit. We are now sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, and heirs in hope of eternal life. St. John also says this in his first letter. Titus then tells us what is expected of us because we have been baptized. To reject godless ways and worldly desires. To live temperately, justly and devoutly in this age. To live in faith, hope and charity.

When a voice from Heaven proclaims Jesus to be the Beloved Son, the pleasure of God, we understand that Jesus enjoys that

premiere place in the sight of God. Where do YOU hear the voice of God? How do you respond to it?

How do you and I, with so many hills and valleys in our spiritual journey, hope to become in any sense pleasing to God? First of all we don't have to earn anything: We already are the pleasure of God!

If a voice from Heaven speaks today over this assembly, it surely declares that WE are beloved children NOW. How does the way you live, reflect what you believe -- that you are genuinely and truly loved by God?

In a real sense, these readings at the end of the Christmas season today bring us back and full circle to the first Sunday of Advent of last month. St. John the Baptist began Advent when he charges us to "Repent and Believe the Good News."

Luke says that with the exuberant preaching of John the Baptist, "The people were filled with expectation." Do I have a sense of joyful expectation about life? Is there a sense of expectation in the community I serve?

The spirit of those words are heard in today's Gospel. We are reminded that when you love someone and you see in their eyes the person they imagine you to be, your best version of yourself, you want to become that, quite naturally.

As they sing at the end of the musical, *Les Miserables*: To love another person is to see the face of God. AMEN!

[Neh. 8:2-4a, 5-6, 8-10; Ps.19; 1 Cor. 12:12-30; Luke 1:1-4, 4:14-21]

Back in September of 2019, our Holy Father, Pope Francis, declared the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time as a Day to celebrate, study and disseminate God's Holy Word as it comes to us in our Bible. I could tell you today my top ten favorite Bible passages, and spend hours talking about them, but I suspect you would start tuning out after ten minutes! They all focus on a message of hope.

A new bishop was visiting the parishes in his dioceses. He asked the pastor of a large church, who was a poor preacher: "What is the occupancy of this building?" Knowing that his homilies caused many to doze off, the pastor said, "This church SLEEPS 700 people!"

Hope is a beautiful virtue. Stop and consider: What do you hope for these days? A fresh new start? Lower prices and bills? Health for an ailing family member? A better job? A change of scenery? A change of heart? Freedom from fear? An Upper Sacristy water pipe that doesn't burst in the winter? It's important to know what we're hoping for, and that we're hoping for *something* and keeping that hope alive. Our hopes define our intentions, our ambitions, and our direction. Hope helps us get where we want most to go. Hope motivates us toward the future. People without hope remain mired in the present -- or worse, they are stuck in the past.

Today's reading from the Book of Nehemiah describes a somewhat odd scene. Just about the entire Israelite nation had just spent a full morning -- apparently with their faces to the ground -- listening to a recitation and interpretation of the book of God's Law.

When it's over, it seems they begin to weep, so much so that Ezra and the priests have to remind them that hearing the decrees of God was supposed to be an occasion of rejoicing, not sadness.

Perhaps it was sore knees that produced their crying, but more likely it was because those assembled realized the great challenges and responsibilities that went with being God's chosen people.

It isn't easy following the Ten Commandments and the teachings of the Church, but it does give us an identity, a purpose and a fulfillment which we could not have without God or His Church.

Ezra and the priests try to give the Israelites hope for the future, hope for living out day to day the laws given by God. It IS possible and it can be joyful!

The people of Galilee in Jesus' time had hopes too. Most of what they hoped for was pretty unlikely, yet they persisted. Just as we gather each week in church around this table of our great hope, the citizens of Nazareth gathered each week in their synagogue to read from their sacred books, to keep hope alive.

Centuries ago, Isaiah had declared God's plan of liberation for Israel. Isaiah foretold this day of freedom to the people in Babylonian exile, and within a generation or two, the exiles did go home. But not to total and unbridled freedom. It was a call to the freedom not to do whatever they WANTED. It was a call to the freedom to do what they OUGHT to be doing. The Israelites were re-called to moral and religious freedom. And they failed miserably. But God didn't give up on them or us. He still has hope in the human family. Until then...

First the Persians ruled over the Israelites. Then the Greeks. Now it was the Romans who kept the Israelites under the thumb of

foreign rule, taxed them to pieces, and tempted their young people with foreign ways of thinking and behaving.

For six centuries since the time of Isaiah, Israel was an oppressed and broken community. Still, they continued to listen to Isaiah's hopeful words about glad tidings and liberty to captives. Only people who lose hope close the book and walk away from it.

When Jesus shows up in Nazareth after His initial successes and all the buzz, His old synagogue is glad to welcome Him back. His family is there. So are His neighbors. These people know Joseph's son. They'd be glad to see what other towns have seen in him, a little pizzazz and a wonder, a sign, a miracle or two.

Jesus reads a prophecy of hope -- and then declares it officially fulfilled. In Himself! By doing this, He claims to be the long-awaited Messiah, the Son of God. Very shortly, this familiar crowd of relatives and neighbors who welcome Him think that Jesus has lost His mind. They are going to try to run Jesus off a cliff, but He breaks through the crowd. What went wrong? Why did these faithful synagogue-goers let go of hope just at the moment when they had it right before their very eyes and might have grasped it?

One essential ingredient in the nature of hope is *action*. We can't just *wish* for a better scenario if we're not prepared to lean into that future with our whole will and our best efforts. When hope stands in front of us, we have to reach for it.

My friends, the Spirit of the Lord is upon YOU! St. Paul reminds us to remember the spiritual gifts and talents we have received at our Baptism, our First Communion, which we celebrate

this weekend with two members of our OCIA -- Joseph and Laura -- and at our Confirmation.

The Spirit of the Lord has anointed YOU to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, the recovery of sight to the blind of heart and mind, to help set those with addictions free, to proclaim a time acceptable to the Lord.

St. Paul lists those gifts that we have at our disposal. There are signs and works you can do that I cannot do. There are signs and wonders I can do that you cannot do. Yet all of us are the Lord's hands and feet, eyes, and ears and mouth. Some of us have a greater honor, and others less honorable.

Find out what part of Christ's body YOU are. Pray and discern how you can be an agent of hope. Look up, read, recite out loud, and pray YOUR favorite Bible passages. Share them with one another. Be hopeful and "do not be sad, for rejoicing in the Lord must be your hope and your strength!" AMEN!