

[Readings: Is 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7; Psalm 80; 1 Cor 1:3-9; Mark 13:33-37]

A woman and her daughter were out Christmas shopping on the day after Thanksgiving. Just as everyone had predicted, the crowds were awful. They had to skip lunch because they were on a tight schedule. Toward the end of the day, Mom was hungry, tired and her feet were killing her. She was getting more and more irritable. As they left the last store, she turned to her daughter and asked, "Did you see the nasty look that salesman gave me?"

Her daughter answered, "He didn't give it to you, Mom. You had it when you went in."

As we enter another Advent season, it may be easy for us to become overwhelmed and a little depressed about all the preparations that lie ahead of us for the next three weeks and one day. Advent is shorter this year because of the day that Christmas falls on. Monday this year. So because of the smaller window of opportunity for preparation, it may not take too long for us, too, to start giving ourselves and one another "nasty looks."

The first Christians faced that same problem: maintaining their spiritual optimism and moral fervor as they awaited the return of the Lord Jesus. The Gospels are filled with parables of a sudden surprise visit by the Lord, and the necessity of always being ready. Paul writes words of thanks to the beleaguered people of Corinth who seem to be happy to flaunt their gifts of knowledge and eloquent speech. He prays that they will be spiritually prepared – found "blameless" when the Lord appears.

Time passes, however, and here we are over 2000 years later, and Jesus is still taking His time instead of minding ours. People slide into moral and spiritual laziness, even agnosticism and atheism. “There is plenty of time.” “Jesus isn’t coming.” “Maybe the whole thing is nonsense.” Oh, yeh?

When was the last time you waited for someone? Someone coming to pick you up? Somebody waiting for you at their home? Going to an airport terminal, or someone going to a train or bus station to pick you up? I really enjoy people-watching when I am waiting in such places. I create stories about them, based on their facial reactions and their body language.

What do our faces and our bodies say about OUR waiting for the Lord? And for that matter, and more importantly, what condition are your soul and my soul in?

Isaiah isn’t too happy with the people surrounding him in Israel, is he? It’s as if he is saying, “Lord, these people are a bunch of sinning, stubborn, spiteful losers. Come on down and take care of Your business. NOW!” Even the words of Jesus Christ Himself sound like overprotective, parental paranoia.

The one image that sticks in my head is when Isaiah says that whatever minimal good deeds we have done are like “polluted rags.” I learned from my Mom that such rags are called “szmaty” in Polish. And they were not appealing! They were disgusting. And that’s what Isaiah has to say about the attitude, the complacency and the apathy of a people once on fire with the Lord. They have become szmaty!

St. Paul seems to have found just the right kind of believers in Corinth. But the very name of Corinth suggested the name of New

York City in the 1970's when the downtown area was infested with organized crime, pornography and prostitution. Welcome to Corinth! But Paul says that the faithful believers "lack no spiritual gift." And neither do we.

Perhaps during this Advent season we can focus not only on the physical gifts and presents we are buying for others and for ourselves, but to seek within us the spiritual gifts that we have been given from the Father, by Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit.

One gift is FAITHFULNESS. Notice how Isaiah puts the blame on God: "Why do YOU let us wander, O Lord from Your ways? Why do YOU harden our hearts so that we fear You not?" Spoiler alert! It isn't GOD who does either of these things. Nor is it the Devil who does these things. We can never say, "The Devil made me do it," because the Devil is powerless over our free will. We always have the power to make choices for good or for evil. For virtue or for sin.

We can grow spiritually drowsy and careless, much like we feel after a full Thanksgiving Day meal! We can wander away and squander our talents on people and things that take us away from God. We are faithful to Jesus Christ when we live in the power of God's grace and peace, in the power of God's favor, knowledge, and every spiritual gift. We just need to ask, to tap into that power. Through prayer, through good works, through financial and material sacrifice.

In Lent, we call this prayer, fasting and almsgiving. During Advent we can call it conversation with God, keeping away from what we don't need, and being generous to our families, to our church, and to those in most need. Stewardship.

So what are we to do? We need to take the time to remember why we have all of our Christmas traditions, and why all of this must be put in their context. Our reflection questions for this week:

Do I see myself as the work of God's hands? What changes could I make to help shape myself into one who is better prepared to receive the Lord?

What do I see as I look ahead? Am I growing impatient? What can I do to ensure that God is in my future?

We can make the conscious choice as Advent begins to pray and reflect on what the birth of Jesus means to us and to our world and how we can make the presence of Jesus more real for ourselves, our loved ones, and people of good will. Today we have the time. But we know how quickly this time will pass.

The Good News of Jesus Christ is always an invitation to change. Advent has begun. The task of conversion is much like the work of the potter with the clay. As we wait in joyful hope, we surrender with confidence to our own transformation in the hands of the Divine Potter. Come, Lord Jesus! AMEN!

**[Bless Advent Wreath after the Homily]**

[Readings: Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11; Ps. 85; 2 Peter 3:8-14; Mark 1:1-8]

Some words never grow old or die. A story, a song or even a prophecy can continue to give life and hope as it is proclaimed over and over again in new circumstances. The comforting words of Isaiah in today's First Reading were beautiful music to the ears of the exiles in Babylon. The words were also music to the ears of the people of Judea several hundred years later. The Jewish people were still an oppressed people – only their oppressors had changed.

This time it was the Romans, and the people strained at the yoke of a new kind of slavery and longed for deliverance and freedom. John the Baptist is a voice crying in the wilderness, and Isaiah's words find a second life on John's lips as he baptizes in the Jordan River and frantically strives to prepare the people for the coming of the Lord.

John wants to stir their hearts, raise their hopes and expectations – and even throw in a little old-fashioned fear to hammer home the point that the time is short. Just as the exiles in Babylon, so now the people in the time of Jesus firmly believe that their own situation and the world in general had become so mired in sin, chaos and injustice that only God could put things right. Sound familiar?

And now us, in our time. The mystery of Christ's love is prophesied by John the Baptist. He is the forerunner of Christ's total self-gift. From the womb of his mother, Elizabeth, to his own death at the hands of Herod, John prepares the way of Christ. Alongside Mary, whom John greets from his mother's womb, John's life is prepared for fruitful Advent contemplation.

In Scripture, where we hear of John's famous "womb leap," we next hear of John as living in the desert. Indeed, the desert could be likened to a tomb. It is a place where life is difficult, empty and harsh. As such, though, it is also a place where we come to learn of our dependence on God.

God alone gives us life. In his great mercy, even God entered into the tomb, into the desert of death, bringing life and love there. John went into the desert to seek God in prayer, and to ask for the spiritual sustenance he needed to prepare God's way. This he began to do by preaching about Christ, and by calling us all to repentance.

And so John accompanies all these crowds of people, going down with them into the depths of their sorrows just as he enters with them into the waters that will wash them clean.

The river and the desert are surprisingly similar. They can both be a place of death. And of life. During Advent, we are still liturgically awaiting Christ's birth. And we do so with John the Baptist, in the desert, and in the river-- in that is, the tomb of sin. We recognize our situation, prepare our hearts for repentance, and hope in the Mighty One whom we know is coming.

Prepare the way of the Lord! What is barren in your life? What is dry and empty? Bring to mind the sins you've done that dried up what should be fruitful. What part of your journey of faith has been difficult? Bring to mind the sins that have been stumbling blocks or pits or ruts in the road. Then get to the Sacrament of Reconciliation to find healing and hope.

We will have a Communal Penance Service with individual confession and absolution. At St. Ephrem Parish this Tuesday at 7

PM and four priests here this Friday at 7 PM. Prepare!

In our Second Reading, St. Peter had to deal with the reality of answering the Ultimate Question: When is Jesus coming back? And should we be afraid? St. Peter uses fantastic imagery in our Second Reading to stress the Last Judgment of God at the end of the world.

He also says that we should be vigilant if for no other reason than the fear of condemnation. St. Peter doesn't leave us twisting in the wind. He exhorts us to be blameless, to live faithfully, and to put the needs of others ahead of our own.

In my waiting, do I remain faithful? Where do I go to prepare for the coming of Christ? Where do I best meet God?

Next weekend is the annual collection for the Retirement Fund for Religious. Religious men and women worked for years proclaiming the Good News through education, medicine and social justice ministries and services. They received little or no pay, just room and board in some cases. Now, in their old age and retirement, they have no income to pay for their care. Some in their 80's and 90's continue to work if they can to support those who cannot.

Let us show our appreciation for these prophetic men and women who pointed the way to the Lamb of God and who taught us by supporting the Retirement Fund for Religious with our prayers and with our financial support. Envelopes are at the sides of our offertory basket boxes. "Come, Lord Jesus!" AMEN!

[Is. 61:1-2a, 10-11; Psalm: Luke 1:46-54; 1 Thess. 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28]

This is the Sunday to once again joke about my “manly rose”-colored vestments, but what we celebrate today at the halfway point of our Advent journey isn’t a joke! It is joy. REJOICE! This command comes from the first word of today’s Second Reading from St. Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians: Rejoice always. He follows that command with several others: Pray. Give thanks. Do not quench the Spirit or despise what prophetic voices are trying to tell us. Test everything.

We are told not to quench the Spirit. Isn’t it amazing how one word, one phrase, one sentence can deflate someone else’s ego and self-esteem? On the flip side, taking time to say something that builds up somebody and affirms them is keeping the Holy Spirit alive and well. What we say to one another can either tear us down or build us up.

This leads to the humility of admitting what St. John the Baptist says in today’s Gospel: “I am not the Christ.” As I counsel people, the recurring theme I hear is: “I want to be in control. I don’t want any surprises.” Someone once said a long time ago, “If you want to make God laugh, show him your plans.” There is something very freeing when we realize we are not God, that we are not the center of the universe, and that we let God be God. When I have to make a judgment call about something, my priest friends remind me that I am in sales, not in management! Except when I am expected to manage a parish!



We are still called, though, to be witnesses who testify to the light, and a voice crying in the desert. We've all experienced times when Jesus did not seem near, available or present to us. What opened your eyes to His presence? What happened that made you realize He was there the whole time?

Many souls are still caught in the wilderness of confusion, hopelessness and pain, heartache and despair, not to mention sinfulness.

Can we rightfully ignore their needs? Is it loving to be quiet so that they cannot hear the truth?

This is what Isaiah means in our First Reading. This is my second favorite passage from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. My Number One Favorite will be on Christmas Eve. By virtue of our baptism each one of us has the Spirit of the Lord poured upon us. The Lord anoints us. He sends each one of us to bring glad tidings to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and release to the prisoners. To announce a year of favor.

I hope you have been blessed as I have been blessed by religious order priests, brothers and sisters who have carried that light of faith and shone it brightly to us. Most of them are now senior citizens, and here and elsewhere and now need our help. This weekend is the annual Retirement Fund for Religious. In her absence, as she is in the Congregation of St. Joseph Motherhouse recovering from a massive stroke, I would like to share Sr. Pat's thoughts and request for our support for the Retirement Fund.

She spoke these words back in December of 2014. Nine years ago! *Good Morning (Afternoon) Everyone!*

*I have been a member of the Congregation of St. Joseph for the past 58 years. I entered that congregation in Nazareth, Michigan following my 12 years of education at St. Philip Neri School in Detroit. I am very grateful to be here today to be able to speak to you about the Retirement Fund for Religious.*

*Many of you have been influenced by men or women religious whom you've encountered through schools, hospitals, parishes or other work places. There is also a generation of Catholics who have never had more than a passing relationship with a religious priest, brother or sister.*

*Men and women religious have had much influence in our Church and society, often speaking out against injustice, the culture of death and other evils such as human trafficking. Those in religious life make an effort to put everyone else's needs above their own and in entering religious life, publicly acknowledged their desire to serve.*

*The Retirement Fund for Religious was launched in 1988 by Catholic bishops in the United States. The annual collection raises funds that are distributed to religious communities across the country. 95% of what is collected goes directly to the **immediate** care of our retired religious. These funds help eligible communities provide for the immediate needs of their elder members and develop long-range retirement strategies.*

*Social Security for religious organizations was not a reality until 1972, when special legislation enabled them to receive it.*

*The average annual Social Security benefit for a religious is \$5,123.43 -- roughly one-third the amount received by the average beneficiary in the United States. There are more than 35,000*

*religious past age 70 living in the United States. In 2013, the average annual cost for their care was \$39,400 per person. For each of the years since, the total cost to support women and men religious has exceeded \$1 billion. By 2024 – next year -- retired religious are projected to outnumber wage-earning religious by four to one.*

*It's very appropriate that we make this appeal on Gaudete or Rejoicing Sunday -- because I can't think of a better word to describe these frail and elderly religious than the word **JOY!** Many of these men and women are the embodiment of what real joy is. Their continual giving and personal choice to be of service rather than requesting aid, gives them a level of joy that many people just dream of. Though limited in what they are able to do, many still volunteer or work part time in whatever way they can. Though past retirement age, we have many religious who still minister to those in hospitals and nursing homes right in our area.*

*Like St. John the Baptist in today's Gospel, these men and women religious know **who** they are, and **who** Christ is. They have been instruments of the transforming power of God in our world. Even as these religious communities confront the challenges of caring for the growing number of elderly, they remain steadfast with a faith in God that is absolute.*

*This annual Retirement Fund for Religious appeal is a way of saying "thank you" for the witness they've given, particularly in the United States. While we are **very aware** of the economic difficulties many have, we ask that you be as generous **as you feel you can.***

*Checks can be made out to St. Martin's with "Religious Retirement" on the memo line. Know that you are prayed for by **many** men and*

*women religious **every day** and they never cease “giving thanks for you.” We ask for your prayers as well.*

*Thank you and may God bless you always.*

[Isaiah 9:1-6; Ps. 96:1-6; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:15-20]

Merry Christmas! Welcome to all who join us tonight/today: parishioners, relatives and family members; to those who join us from other parishes, especially from our Family of Parishes; to students and military and former parishioners who have “come home for Christmas,” and to those who are searching for a spiritual home. “May you find all you need here.” Especially true freedom.

I think there is a longing deep in the human heart to be free, especially from sin. Of course, our inclination to sin can be very strong in us, and we often easily look in all the wrong places to find love. But deep down, no matter how much we try to deceive ourselves into believing otherwise, we know that we are not free.

We are bound, imprisoned, and enslaved by our sinful habits. We often feel stuck in our sins or addictions and feel unable to find a way out. Indeed, left alone to our own devices, there is NO WAY OUT for us. We are simply incapable of saving ourselves from our own sins. And it is only once we admit this truth to ourselves that we can recognize our need for a Savior. Here is where we find that Savior.

The name "Jesus" means, "God saves." In fact, in order to save us, God did not simply send a messenger; rather, He Himself came down to earth as our Savior. He Himself is our healer and our path to freedom. He alone has power over the forgiveness of our sins.

The One who has this power to conquer our sins and restore us to true freedom came as a tiny baby, unnoticed not only by the world but even by those who had longed and looked for His coming for centuries. He became one like us, so that we could become like Him.

It was only those who were “poor in spirit” who knew their own need for God -- Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the Magi, Simeon, Anna – all who recognized Him when He first came. We, too, must acknowledge our need for Him, our need for a Savior if we are to recognize His presence and action in our lives. Otherwise, we will miss the peace and freedom that He alone can give us.

Jesus came to set us free from all that binds us. He gives us this gift of freedom freely and generously. He offers us a share in His own life. This is true freedom! To destroy vices and to build up virtues. That is exactly what a life of virtue does: the more I have virtue, the freer I am, and the easier it is for me to choose the good.

If I truly have the virtue of temperance, it will be easy for me to refrain from eating another helping of food when I am already full. But if I do not have temperance, often my taste buds will dictate my decisions instead of my use of reason. The goodness of God can fill the empty person completely, which is the miraculous abundant life that we need.

Like the baby in the manger, each one of us was and is created intentionally by God. No baby is ever an accident. Sometimes, that baby is a surprise, but never an accident. Or a disaster! God decided to make each one of us just as surely as God decided to create Holy Mary without sin and give her the honor of the gift of a new life growing within her.

During his earthly life and for all time, Jesus empties Himself in love for you and for me, at the same time longing and thirsting for some small return.

What a difference a comma makes. Forty years ago, when I first proclaimed the Gospel passage from Luke, Chapter 2, verses 16 to 21, I said it this way: “The shepherds went in haste to Bethlehem and found Mary and Joseph and the infant lying in the manger.”

After Mass, one of my parishioners teased me by saying, “That must have been a big manger to be able to hold Mary, Joseph and the Baby Jesus!” I forgot to pause between, “and found Mary and Joseph, comma, and the infant lying in the manger.”

How many of you know what the word, “manger” means? It comes from the Latin word “mangere” which means, “to eat.” That’s where we get the Italian word, “mangiare.” A manger is a feeding trough for animals.

The symbol of the wood of the manger for the infant Jesus becomes the symbol of the wood of the Cross upon which Jesus becomes our Divine Food. On Christmas Day, when the infant Jesus is laid in it, it becomes a sanctified feeding place for those who share the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ, the newborn King. Now Jesus Christ, Risen and Ascended into Heaven.

I want to share a reflection with you from a study program at Manresa Jesuit Retreat House entitled “How to Be a Manger.” At first, a manger is an empty collection of wood. Then it becomes sturdy, soft inside with hay, still, and then ready to be used.

This Christmas I pray that each of us will be a manger.

I pray that you will be EMPTY -- Empty of all the clutter and distractions of life, empty to receive the newborn Christ.

I pray that you will be STURDY -- Sturdy to bear your personal and secret burdens, sturdy to bear the presence of God within.

I pray that you will be SOFT INSIDE -- Soft inside for the healing embrace of yourself & others, soft inside to give God a place in your heart and in your life to give you peace.

I pray that you will be STILL -- Still to attend to the cry of the poor, still to hear and to attend to the whisper of God's prompting voice.

I pray that you will be READY -- Ready to receive whatever God gives to you, ready to use your gifts for whatever God's call to you. Remember that nothing is happening or will happen to you, that together, you and God can't handle.

Bringing it all together, this Christmas I pray for you that you will become a manger.

"How to Be a Manger?" Be empty, be sturdy, be soft inside, be still, be ready. And come forward to the altar to be fed by Jesus Christ at this "Christ Mass." Merry Christmas! AMEN!



[Genesis 15:1-6; 21:1-3; Psalm 105; Hebrews 11:8, 11-12, 17-19; Luke 2:22-40] OR [Sirach 3:2-7, 12-14; Psalm 128; Colossians 3:12-21; Luke 2:22-40]

I call your attention to three articles in today's parish bulletin. They all deal with the Solemn Feast of the Holy Family, which we celebrate today. I ask that you be sure to take a copy of the bulletin home with you, to discuss as a family, and as spouses.

The first article reminds fathers of their call, their vocation, their "job description," if you will.

As fathers, it is your job to provide a solid footing in the Catholic Faith. The evidence shows that when a father believes in God and lives out his faith in his daily life, his children are 10 times more likely to be committed Catholics as adults. A living faith inspires. And for your sons and daughters, no one has more power to inspire than a faithful father does.

The great challenge of our time is to give men the tools to be good fathers -- the kind of fathers who believe in Christ and raise their children in the faith. If we do that, we'll ensure a brighter future for our children, while dramatically improving the health of our society, one family at a time. If you want your children to rise above the moral chaos of this world, you need to be fathers who introduce them to the joy of living a Christian life. We cannot do this alone.

All of us were made with a need for community. Scripture tells us that "a threefold cord is not quickly broken" (Eccl 4:12), while "Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another" (Prv 27:17). We make each other better when united as brothers and sisters in Christ.

We're living in a time of endless moral traps and constant impediments to family life. If we hope to avoid those pitfalls and overcome those obstacles, we must do so together.

Christ himself formed a band of men to carry out His mission. The Apostles didn't choose one another, but they certainly needed one another -- and so do we. None of this is easy, but we weren't called to a life of ease. Let us ask the intercession of St. Joseph, patron of fathers, to help all fathers to embrace their noble vocation, for the sake of your children and grandchildren.

The topic of family links today's Scripture passages. The reading from Sirach instructs us: Whoever honors his father atones for sins, and those who respect their mother store up riches. Those who care for elderly parents are not forgotten, and their kindness is firmly planted as an offering against sin. In St. Luke's Gospel, the Evangelist tells of Joseph and Mary's presentation of Jesus to the Lord in the Jerusalem Temple. This is done in accordance with Mosaic Law. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph then return to Nazareth, where our Lord grows in strength and wisdom. So do Joseph and Mary!

How can we be a holy domestic family, and a holy parish community? A "Family of Parishes?" St. Paul tells us in our Second Reading. Work on: "heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience."

Put up with each other's frailties as much as we complement each other's strengths. Be thankful. Teach each other about mutual respect for property, for persons, for life. Sing often. Whatever you do, think of doing it for God in the name of the Lord Jesus.

To strengthen your family, make time daily to pray and eat at least one meal together. Most important, attend Sunday Mass weekly as a family and partake of Holy Communion. At least once a week, sit down and listen to each other, and really talk.

I have heard people say, “You don’t get to choose your family!” I believe that to be only partially true. I did not choose my father and mother, but my family is greater than my family tree of ancestors. My family includes those who have been there before and after the death of my parents and all three siblings, none of whom reached 60 years.

My family includes those who celebrated with me my greatest triumphs and consoled me in my greatest times of trial. Each and every one of them I have chosen to be a part of my family.

Most of the time we talk about stewardship in terms of time, talent, and treasure. We quantify the size of our gifts, seeing them as things that have a finite value. However, true stewardship is when we fully empty ourselves into another and into the reality of God, and we find ourselves transformed. We truly grow into our own as “the new creations” we became at our baptism.

It is in that transformation that we find ourselves connected to others in a profound way. Those who were not connected to us by blood are now connected to us by spirit. Our family, the body of Christ, grows and becomes stronger. In this family, a man can be father to a Son not of his flesh (St. Joseph) and a woman can be a mother to a Son of a divine origin (Mary). In this family, we find our hope and our home. And that IS a choice!

In just a few minutes, we will move from the table of the Word to the table of the Eucharist. We will once again be nourished and strengthened to be Christ for everyone in our parish family, our neighborhood, our school, our workplace, our Church and our world.

Perhaps as we approach New Year's with its necessary resolutions, we can add one more – to be present for more family meals and events at home and here in this holy place. In our sorrows and trials, in our failure to love and to forgive, we turn to the Holy Family and ask them to teach us to love as they love.

In our world today, the picture of families is very different from what it was in the past. But whatever kind of family you have, the Holy Family can teach us many things. Take time this week to invoke their help and to pray for the restoration of the dignity of family life in our country. May Jesus, Mary and Joseph be our model and hope.

Here is a New Year's Blessing for Families: We bless your name, O Lord for sending Your own Incarnate Son to become part of a family, so that, as He lived His life, He like us, would experience its worries and its joys.

We ask you, Lord, to protect and watch over this parish family, and all the families – the “Domestic Churches” – that make up this parish family, so that in the strength of Your grace its members may enjoy prosperity, possess the priceless gift of your peace, and, as the Church alive in the home, bear witness in this world to Your glory. We ask this through Christ our Lord. AMEN!