

DECEMBER

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9 10 11 12 13 14

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20 21 22 23 24

25 VIGIL

25 NIGHT

25 DAY

26 27 28 29 30 31

Saturday, December 1, 2018
(Lec. 508)

1) Revelation 22:1-7

2) Luke 21:34-36

Gospel related: CCC 2612

SATURDAY OF
34TH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(Saturday in honor of BVM)

FOCUS: Joy and turmoil exist side by side in our lives.

There is an episode in the old comedy series "Everybody Loves Raymond" where his parents are stressing out when they realize the gift of fruit which Ray gives them is not a onetime thing. Fruit will be coming every month for the next year. They simply don't know how to handle this.

In our first reading, we hear about the *tree of life* that produces fruit twelve times, once each month. Unlike Ray's parents in the sitcom, there is no need for *us* to stress, for like the other images within this reading, the tree and its fruit speak of the good things to come in the kingdom of God.

With this image of the kingdom of God, the Church brings to close another liturgical year. Advent, and a new liturgical year, start tomorrow, and they begin the same way this year ends. (Spoiler alert, tomorrow's Gospel is an expansion of today's reading. It's amazing how the Church does this, isn't it?)

In today's Gospel, Jesus warns his disciples to not let their hearts *become drowsy*. We must remain vigilant, Jesus tells us, and try to remain free from *the anxieties of daily life*.

So whether it is the last day of the Church year, the beginning of Advent, Lent, Christmastide or the Easter Season, or any other day, we are to stay steadfast and ready for an encounter with our God. Yes, difficult things will and do come our way, but we have been blessed with a faith and with a community of believers that assists us in facing any storm now present or on the horizon.

Our two readings today stand in contrast to each other, as do our lives at times. Our first reading speaks to the glory of the reign of God, and the Gospel speaks of turmoil. Glory and turmoil co-exist more than we sometimes realize, but they are at the heart of our faith: in a God who died and then rose; in a kingdom present and not yet fully realized; in practical daily moments where we welcome the birth of a new child, with joy, and yet may be mourning the death of older loved ones in our lives.

Through it all, when we stay connected to God and follow his instructions, we weather the storms and celebrate the joys of life and, when necessary, we do so at the same time. Yes, the Church year ends today and another starts tomorrow.

Our whole life is a series of beginnings and endings – some filled with joy, others with turmoil. All these things prepare us for the ultimate end and the grand new beginning we will each face some day. Let us not stress over this reality, rather, let us embrace it. May we choose to live our lives focused on what is in store for us in the kingdom of God.

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**YEAR C
WEEKDAYS I**

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 2, 2018

(Lec. 3)

- 1) Jeremiah 33:14-16
- 2) 1 Thessalonians 3:12–4:2
- 3) Luke 21:25-28, 34-36

Gospel related: CCC 671, 697, 2612

**FIRST SUNDAY
OF ADVENT**

FOCUS: In looking forward to the return of Christ in glory, our hearts are full of hope and expectation.

As we hear today's readings, two temptations so easily appear: first, we might presume that since we have been waiting so long for the return of Christ, that it won't be anytime soon and so we will have lots of time to prepare. The other is, we may assume that his return is any moment now, so that we live in fear of that great day – frozen and unable to hope or to embrace life's adventure. Neither of these temptations is worth embracing. Instead, we look forward to his return, and as we wait, we use the time to grow in our relationship with the Lord, while understanding that this world is not our ultimate home.

Today's Gospel can seem very sobering. Jesus doesn't mince his words – there is going to be a reckoning, a judgment – and we do not know when. But we know it *is* coming, and therefore we need to be vigilant, prayerful and ready. This is not a pious platitude, but a tenet of faith that we profess in our creed. The judgment will be a real one; the review of our life with its many choices and options will be laid out before us in the bright light of God's revelation and mercy.

But there are also two other themes in this Gospel passage that we need in order to have the full picture. First, as Christians, we are encouraged to stand tall in the knowledge that our redeemer is at hand, and to hold fast to the hope that our faith gives us even in times of trial and tribulation. We know the final outcome in the great battle between good and evil – Christ's triumph over death. Our task is to ensure that we are on that winning side by living lives worthy of him. We cannot take it for granted, but instead daily renew our commitment to fulfill the hope that is within us – and live our lives in the sure and certain knowledge that our redemption is at hand.

Second, as Christians we are called to be realistic, to face up to the fact that our world is broken and in need of healing, and yet we are never hopeless. Indeed, the Christian view is to see imperfection not as a lost cause but as an opportunity for healing and redemption. All is never lost until that moment of final judgment.

This is what we celebrate in the Advent season – a time of preparation and anticipation. We look forward to the coming of Christ, and as we look forward we strive to be vigilant, prayerful and worthy to stand before him when he comes in glory.

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Monday, December 3, 2018
(Lec. 175)

- 1) Isaiah 2:1-5
- 2) Matthew 8:5-11

Gospel related: CCC 543, 1386, 2610

MONDAY
OF ADVENT
- FIRST WEEK
(OBL. MEM.
Saint Francis Xavier, Priest)

FOCUS: True faith in God is not dependent on the results of our prayers.

In the Gospel of Matthew, a centurion makes an appeal to Jesus to heal his paralyzed servant. Jesus responds, definitively, saying, *I will come and cure him*, but the centurion, speaking from a position of confidence in Jesus, humbly states he is not worthy to have Jesus come to his home. Jesus recognizes the true faith of the centurion, and praises him for having faith in the power and promise of God, even before that power and promise is demonstrated. From that moment, the centurion's faith has been held up as a model of trust in Jesus.

Centurions were Roman soldiers, and as this centurion acknowledged in his conversation with Jesus, he was in charge of soldiers and completely understood the authority that goes with such a position. All he would have to do is tell people what to do and they would do it. But, with Jesus, he was not making a forceful command when he asked that he heal his servant. He was speaking from a position of humility and faith. He was a Gentile, and his faith in Jesus was reflected in his confidence that Jesus would heal his servant. Even a powerful Roman soldier was subject to the true power of God when it came to miraculous healings. There was a limit to the soldier's power.

It is interesting that this person of strength and authority – this centurion of the Roman army – is held up by Jesus as the sole person in all of Israel who has such faith. Jesus indicates that even those who anticipate enjoying the heavenly banquet alongside Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will not hold a place of honor due to their lack of faith.

There are reasons that the healing of the centurion's servant, which we know from the entire Gospel to have happened, is not actually included in the passage proclaimed today. One of those reasons might be this: our trust is not that God will always give us exactly what we want, but that he loves us and is always present to us – that he always gives us what we *need*, and that eternal life is given to all who seek him. We are confident in this, no matter the outcome of our prayerful pleadings. Challenging? Yes, of course, but notice that the centurion's faith did not come *after* the healing, but was expressed *before*. Our faith, also, is not dependent on the outcome, but is centered on the God who first called to us, and on our humble response as we trust in him.

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Tuesday, December 4, 2018
(Lec. 176)

- 1) Isaiah 11:1-10
- 2) Luke 10:21-24

TUESDAY
OF ADVENT
- FIRST WEEK
(Opt. Mem.
Saint John Damascene,
Priest and Doctor of the Church)

Gospel related: CCC 1083, 2603

FOCUS: Let us share the Good News with childlike fervor.

A little child will guide those who live in the peaceful kingdom that Isaiah described in today's first reading. Jesus praised his Father for revealing the mysteries of his kingdom, not to intellectuals, but *to the childlike*. What is it about little children?

Little children are honest. We know exactly what they're thinking and feeling. Maybe that is one reason they're so trusting. Hypocrisy wouldn't occur to them. Also, little ones haven't had time to become arrogant or close-minded. With limited experience of their own, children accept what parents, siblings, teachers and others tell them at face value. Because so much of the world is new to them, children are open to new experiences.

They're especially open to love – wherever it comes from. Little ones don't care about someone's social status, bank account or intellect. They know who treats them kindly and who they feel safe with. They're receptive to love – and when they give it, it's genuine.

Those same qualities – honesty, open-mindedness, trust and humility – create an environment where faith, peace and love can thrive. No wonder God can reveal the mysteries of his kingdom of love to those who are childlike. They're the ones most open to receive it.

We, as adults, spend a great deal of time acquiring knowledge, which is a good thing. The risk we run is that the more knowledge we acquire, the more likely we are to think we have all the answers. We might rely too heavily on what we think we know or on what the world considers shrewd priorities: money, power, notoriety. Knowledge isn't bad, but when we make idols out of our own intellects, we can become smug, close-minded and focused on protecting our own egos.

We can refuse to see with childlike trust those truths that counter what logic tells us. Isaiah gives us an example. Those naturally in conflict, like wolves and lambs, can live together in peace with a little child leading them. Now, we don't need to be naïve. Conflicts will arise at work, at school, at home and elsewhere, but humble acceptance of ourselves and others can alleviate those conflicts and breed mutual respect. We can live in peace in spite of our differences when we let go of our egos and allow ourselves to be led by a childlike heart. It's no wonder the Prince of Peace chose to come to us as a little child.

Let us now approach that Prince of Peace, as loving children; with hearts and hands ready to receive and accept his body and blood; with childlike fervor to share the Good News we have heard.

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Wednesday, December 5, 2018
(Lec. 177)

- 1) Isaiah 25:6-10a
- 2) Matthew 15:29-37

Gospel related: CCC 1329, 1335

WEDNESDAY
OF ADVENT
- FIRST WEEK

FOCUS: True disciples of Jesus care for all people, as does the Lord on his holy mountain.

Today's Gospel passage is not the only retelling of a time when Jesus fed the multitudes from a very small resource. Why does the author, Matthew, stress this type of miracle in his Gospel? Perhaps it has something to do with the Lord's mountain, about which the prophet Isaiah proclaims.

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will provide for all peoples. All people. Not just people who look like us, or live in our neighborhood, or share our hemisphere. He will destroy the veil that veils all peoples, the web that is woven over all nations. The Lord will remove the reproach from the whole earth. Not just from Israelites, but from Gentiles. He will destroy death forever, for all.

Jesus was on that mountain when he fed the multitudes. He healed *the lame, the blind, the deformed, the mute, and many others*. He was there for any and all who came to him and believed in him. Maybe the repetition of the miraculous feeding with different details was meant by Matthew to draw attention to just that. The Lord God is present to us, and promises us a holy mountain upon which we will have eternal succor. Jesus comes as the Incarnation of that promise, and we – like the disciples and the crowds – may choose to follow, believe and be nourished.

Jesus provided a feast so great for all the people that there were baskets of leftovers. But Jesus did not feed the people alone. He gave the food to his disciples, who in turn gave them to the crowds. And the disciples did not give food only to Jewish people. They did not only tend to the healthy in the crowd. The disciples gave the food from Jesus to all people who asked for, and accepted it – who all ate and were satisfied. That is what a disciple of Jesus does: feeds all people. Not only those who look like them or talk like them or live like them or worship like them. A disciple of Jesus cares for all people, as does the Lord himself on his holy mountain.

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Thursday, December 6, 2018
(Lec. 178)

- 1) Isaiah 26:1-6
- 2) Matthew 7:21, 24-27

THURSDAY
OF ADVENT
- FIRST WEEK
(Opt. Mem.
Saint Nicholas, Bishop)

Gospel related: **CCC** 443, 1821, 1970, 2611, 2826; **CSDC** 70

FOCUS: The teachings of Jesus provide our lives with the solid foundation we need.

In today's first reading, Isaiah calls God the *eternal Rock* on which Israel is built. In the Gospel, Jesus teaches that those who listen to his words and act on them are like people who build their houses on a foundation of rock, rather than on sand. When the storms of life come, those with the rock foundation will stand strong, while those who built their lives on a sandy foundation – not listening to Jesus or following his teachings – will have nothing on which to stand.

Jesus and Isaiah paint dramatic images in these readings, made even more meaningful by the storms, landslides and other natural disasters that challenge people all over the world. In times of trouble, we need something or someone to hold onto. God provides *that someone*: his son, Jesus. And as terrible as natural disasters are, adversity, like serious illness, divorce, drug abuse, or loss of a job can be even more soul-challenging. Jesus is there with and for us in each of those times, giving us a place to plant our feet and withstand the assault.

We have to be careful not to misunderstand this offer of help. God never said we would *not have* rough times. Those times will surely come. The great thing is that we do not have to face them alone. We have the Creator of the Universe, and his Son, the Savior of the World, by our side. Still, bad things do happen to good people. Relying on God to help us through them is what these readings are about. We can trust God to be there, strengthening us, guiding us, helping us make wise decisions. He never forces his way in, however. He waits for us to turn to him, trust him and open ourselves to his guidance.

As we are in the first week of Advent, we have begun our preparations for the coming of the Lord. Today is also the feast of Saint Nicholas, who is honored for his holiness, his defense of the faith, and for his generosity. Because of his acts of charity, he has become associated with gift giving at this time of year. On his feast it is appropriate to be grateful for both material and spiritual gifts. The best gift we have received is our salvation. Let us use this day to thank God for all he has done for us, for the helpers he has sent us, like Saint Nicholas, and for being with us always.

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Friday, December 7, 2018
(Lec. 179)

- 1) Isaiah 29:17-24
- 2) Matthew 9:27-31

FRIDAY
OF ADVENT
- FIRST WEEK
(OBL MEM
Saint Ambrose,
Bishop and Doctor of the Church)

Gospel related: CCC 439, 2616

FOCUS: We must dare to ask for great things and have great faith, just like the blind men.

Saint Teresa of Ávila is quoted as saying “You pay God a compliment by asking great things of Him.”

The two blind men in today’s Gospel do just that: they asked Jesus for a great thing. They called him *Son of David*, one of his Messianic titles, and begged Jesus to have pity on them. They believed, deeply, that Jesus could heal them, and ultimately, it was up to them whether this happened. Jesus says, *Let it be done for you according to your faith*, and their eyes were opened.

As always, our Lord does not force himself upon us. He extends the offer and patiently waits for our response; in this case, for the men to affirm their faith. When they did, a miracle happened.

If Jesus said to us, *Let it be done for you according to your faith*, what would happen?

The prophet Isaiah describes a land where injustice and ignorance cease. This comes through faith. And there are many small ways we can help bring about that vision: for example, instructing others about the faith, setting a good example of revering God, helping the lowly. Just as during Advent we await the Second Coming of our Savior, we can continue the work of building up the kingdom of God here. But we cannot do this alone; we must ask the Father how we each fit into his plan, and pray for the strength to act.

What if we dared ask Jesus to have pity on us, and on the world, and to use us as his hands and feet to do the Lord’s work? What if we dared to ask him to lead us anywhere for his glory? Our presence here at this Mass, in essence, does just that.

And when Jesus replies to us, *Let it be done for you according to your faith*, we know what happens first. We come to the altar to be transformed into a people who do as the blind men did: to go out and *spread word of him through all that land*. As to what else will happen? That is up to us – according to our faith.

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Saturday, December 8, 2018
(Lec. 689)

- 1) Genesis 3:9-15, 20
- 2) Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12
- 3) Luke 1:26-38

**THE IMMACULATE
CONCEPTION OF THE
BLESSED VIRGIN MARY**
(Patronal Feastday
of the
United States of America)
- SOLEMNITY
(Holyday of Obligation)

Gospel related: **CCC** 64, 148, 269, 273, 276, 332, 430, 437, 484, 486, 488, 490, 491, 494, 497, 505, 510, 559, 697, 706, 709, 723, 2571, 2617, 2677, 2812, 2827, 2856; **CSDC** 59

FOCUS: You have found favor with God.

Today, the Universal Church celebrates the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception – the fact that Saint Anne and Saint Joachim conceived Mary without the stain of original sin (St. Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*, 1854). She was redeemed from the moment of her conception (CCC 491). Today’s Gospel reading reminds us of *why* this was so – she was to be the Mother of God. The angel Gabriel announces her role in God’s plan of salvation: this spotless Virgin was to bear the Son of God and she was to call him Jesus – “God saves.”

This poor, young woman from Nazareth had such faith in the plan of God that she said “yes.” Unlike Adam and Eve, Mary was not blinded by the allure of earthly things, nor the trickery of evil, nor the promptings of other humans. She simply responded, *Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done unto me according to your word.* God found in her the acceptance that he had awaited from the beginning. “Without a single sin to restrain her, she gave herself entirely to the person and to the work of her Son” (CCC 494).

What can we learn from Mary? While none of us is perfect like she was perfect, we can certainly see in Mary the model of humility and obedience. Perhaps, in this Advent season, we can focus on God’s plan of salvation and less on the trappings of material things. Perhaps we could better appreciate that we, too, *have found favor with God.* For the Child which Mary carried in her womb came to redeem each of us and all of us – Christ has saved us, and Christ’s grace continues to sustain us. Mary’s Son would be *called holy, the Son of God.* He has given us a share in his divine life so that we, too, may be holy.

Paul reminds us of this in the second reading: *God ... has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens, as he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him. In love he destined us for adoption through Jesus Christ ... so that we might exist for the praise of his glory.*

Can we live up to this? Can we recognize that God has chosen us, too? Can we live a life of holiness? Let us turn to God in prayer and seek to know his plan for us. Let us not hesitate to listen to his answer, because *nothing will be impossible for God.*

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SUNDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2018

(Lec. 6)

- 1) Baruch 5:1-9
- 2) Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11
- 3) Luke 3:1-6

Gospel related: CCC 535

**SECOND SUNDAY
OF ADVENT**

FOCUS: The Lord will purify us, perfect us and prepare us for himself.

Many of us have likely heard the phrase “All roads lead to Rome.” The Roman Empire prided itself on its complex system of roads connecting every part of the empire with the capital. These stone-paved roads stretched throughout Europe, Asia, North Africa and the Middle East. They were built by slaves and paid for by taxes from conquered lands. These roads were feats of engineering, passing over hills and mountains, under aqueducts, taking many twists and turns to avoid nature’s obstacles. They were anything but straight.

John the Baptist would have traveled Roman roads many times in his life, as did those who came out into the desert to hear him preach. It was there, where the roads end in the desert, that John tells his disciples to build a new road – one for God’s Son: *Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths*. John was not telling them to pick up shovels and pick axes. Rather, he prayed that they might pave a way for the love of the Lord to enter their hearts and touch their souls.

John is the last prophet before Jesus, as well as his first disciple. For those willing to undertake this ambitious task of making a straight path for the Lord, John tells them they will be met along the way by God in the flesh. He comes alongside us to assist us in our “road-making” and bridge-building, making winding roads both straight and smooth, by forgiving us our sins and removing obstacles from our path. *Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low*. The Lord will purify us, perfect us and prepare us for himself.

This road work began in us on the day of our baptism, and it continues until we meet the Lord at our death, as Paul told the Philippians: *I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it*. To help things along, the Apostle encourages us to increase in knowledge, love and perception, discerning *what is of value*. This Advent season, what is of greatest value is not the large number of gifts soon to appear under the tree. Rather, it is the gift of God’s only Son who hung on the tree of the cross for us and for our salvation.

During this busy season, we do so much to prepare for the coming of Christmas. Let us make sure we spend at least as much effort this Advent season preparing for the coming of Christ, both his birth in Bethlehem and his return in glory as our King. At this Eucharistic table, we partake of the promise found in the words of Isaiah, and John: *and all flesh shall see the salvation of God*. May we too, then, prepare the way of the Lord as we go forth and proclaim the Good News we have heard and received.

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Monday, December 10, 2018
(Lec. 181)

1) Isaiah 35:1-10

2) Luke 5:17-26

Gospel related: CCC 1116

MONDAY
OF ADVENT
- SECOND WEEK

FOCUS: We are called to wait in hope for the Lord's forgiveness and healing to take root and lead to transformation.

In today's Gospel, we hear about *some men* who bring a paralyzed man, maybe a friend, to the Lord. They had obstacles to overcome – carrying him there, figuring out how to get him into such a crowded room, etc. Some might have been deterred at the seemingly impossible task, but not these men. They persevered. And once they had succeeded, once their friend was right in front of Jesus, they waited and hoped. And their hope and their faith were rewarded with forgiveness and healing: their friend was transformed into a new person, able to do what he couldn't do before. Can we imagine how those men must have felt? The joy at seeing their hope fulfilled?

Many of us have at some point brought a friend, a loved one, a son, a grandchild, to the Lord. And like the men in the Gospel, we probably encountered obstacles, not least among them, our friend or loved one themselves. Our loved one, young or old, who finds the whole thing "boring," who doesn't see the point of Church, doesn't believe in all that "God stuff." And sometimes, these obstacles deter us and we throw our hands up and give up because it's too exhausting to argue. Other times, we persevere maybe for no other reason than that we are obstinate.

But maybe the obstacle isn't other people, maybe it's us. We want something to happen and to happen now, and to happen just so. Yes, the men brought their paralyzed friend to Jesus, but then they had to *wait*. They had to *wait* for the Lord to act, and they had to *wait* and see how their friend responded. They could neither make Jesus nor their friend do what they hoped each would do. But God is merciful, Jesus forgave and healed the paralytic, and he responded instantly to this transformation. Things don't always work out in just this way, though; sometimes, in God's mercy, we wait and God blesses us with something – but we do not respond as quickly or as readily as the paralytic did.

And how hard it is to wait with hope for healing and transformation to take root. How hard it is to accept that we can't make this happen for others – that we must leave the work of forgiveness, healing and transformation in the Lord's capable hands. But fortunately, the Lord doesn't leave us to struggle with this challenge alone. He strengthens us in hope and in faith through the gift of his very self in the Eucharist, reminding us that he is always with us – always forgiving us, and always healing and loving us.

So let us wait, in hope, for all that God *will* do in, through and for us, even as he is doing things *right now*. Let us persevere in faith, remembering that through the redemption and advocacy made possible in Jesus Christ, we are always, like the paralytic in the story, placed *into the middle [and] in front of* the Lord.

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Tuesday, December 11, 2018
(Lec. 182)

- 1) Isaiah 40:1-11
- 2) Matthew 18:12-14

Gospel related: CCC 605, 2822

TUESDAY
OF ADVENT
- SECOND WEEK
(Opt. Mem.
Saint Damasus I, Pope)

FOCUS: Jesus teaches that each and every person is precious to the Father.

Despite technology's ability to build connections with people around the world, research shows that loneliness is becoming epidemic. For those among us who have felt deep pangs of loneliness, depression or low self-esteem at some point, it can be difficult to imagine being loved by someone so much that he or she would go to the far reaches of the earth to rescue us and bring us back into the fold. Yet that is what Jesus proclaims today in the Gospel of Matthew.

The shepherd will leave, not only the majority, but practically his entire flock, to go find the stray. In most cases, the sheep would be watched over by a fellow shepherd, or left in some form of protection. This is not a reckless move by the shepherd. But the parable is not about the shepherd (or human beings in general), but about God: God, whose full and boundless love for us naturally seeks us out. God, whose limitless and uncontainable grace can find us wherever we are. God, whose careful attention to his flock as a whole means no one is left vulnerable while he pursues those who stray.

As the arms, feet and face of Christ for others, we, then, take this as our own mission: to seek out and bring to our Church family those who may have strayed, or who are at the margins. To maintain care for one another within the community, through God's provision of the Church, while constantly reaching out to find the ones missing from the flock. For "there is not, never has been, and never will be a single human being for whom Christ did not suffer" (CCC 605).

The Good News to live and share is this: If we, or anyone, has unwittingly strayed too far from God, let us not despair. We will likely find the road back to God will be easier than the road away, because Christ, has noticed, he is pursuing us already, and as soon as we turn back to him, he will put us on his shoulders and carry us back home.

This Advent season, let us, as a church community, cry out the Good News – comforting God's people – and focus our efforts on making a path of sincere kindness, hope and joy unto to the Lord, bringing with us every stray that may have once been far from the fold.

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Wednesday, December 12, 2018
(Lec. 690A)

**OUR LADY
OF GUADALUPE
- FEAST: USA**

- 1) Zechariah 2:14-17 or
Revelation 11:19a; 12:1-6a, 10ab
- 2) Luke 1:26-38 or
1:39-47

NOTE: Or any readings from the *Lectionary for Ritual Masses* (vol. IV), the Common of the Blessed Virgin Mary, nos. 707-712. Gospel related: **CCC** 64, 148, 269, 273, 276, 332, 430, 437, 448, 484, 486, 488, 490, 491, 494, 495, 497, 505, 510, 523, 559, 697, 706, 709, 717, 722, 723, 2097, 2571, 2617, 2619, 2675, 2676, 2677, 2812, 2827, 2856; **CSDC** 59

FOCUS: All people are invited to be a part of the kingdom of God.

Today's feast, on which we celebrate Our Lady of Guadalupe, gives us an appreciation for Mary from a different perspective than the one we celebrated recently on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception.

In 1531, Mary appeared to Juan Diego, a poor Aztec convert to Christianity. She asked him to plead with the bishop of nearby Mexico City to build a church. The bishop countered that he required a sign. When Juan Diego again saw Mary, she directed him, in the middle of the winter, to gather flowers growing on a hillside and to show them to the bishop. When Juan Diego opened the cloak in which he had gathered the flowers, a beautiful image of Our Lady of Guadalupe was revealed. To this day, that cloak continues to inspire pilgrims who journey to Mexico to behold its beauty.

In the sixteenth century, the country that is now Mexico was under Spanish rule, and the native people were subject to the Spaniards. As with many indigenous peoples, they were exposed to many customs and traditions that the newcomers brought, including religion. This is how Christianity first came to the people, and it blossomed with Mary's appearance to Juan.

During this Advent season, we recall that the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary to herald good news. Gabriel could have come to any Jewish girl, but he came to a simple girl living in the country. The mother of our Savior was humble – not a person of means or status. Likewise, Mary could have appeared to anyone in Mexico, but instead of revealing herself to a person of religious power and influence, she came to a native peasant with little social standing.

The indigenous people celebrated that Mary came to one of their own. And as a result of her apparitions to a simple man, Christianity truly began to become the religion of the people. In the words of the prophet Zechariah today, *Many nations shall join themselves to the Lord on that day, and they shall be his people, and he will dwell among you.* The Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe helps all of us to remember that we truly are a catholic Church – a *universal* Church for all people, in which all people are invited to join, and in which all people ought to be welcomed.

This Catholic Church is where the Body of Christ comes alive. Let us remember the words that Our Lady of Guadalupe spoke to that simple peasant man: "Am I not here, I, who am your mother? Are you not under my shadow and protection? Are you not in the hollow of my mantle, the crossing of my arms? Am I not the source of all your joy? What more do you need? Let nothing else worry you, disturb you." May we celebrate Our Lady of Guadalupe by making these words come alive for ourselves and for all of our brothers and sisters with whom we rejoice in sharing our faith.

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Thursday, December 13, 2018
(Lec. 184)

- 1) Isaiah 41:13-20
- 2) Matthew 11:11-15

Gospel related: CCC 523, 719

THURSDAY
OF ADVENT
- SECOND WEEK
(OBL MEM
Saint Lucy, Virgin and Martyr)

FOCUS: We have been given the gift of Jesus Christ, who enables us to be strong and to follow him.

As we proceed on our journey through Advent, we encounter readings which give us food for thought. God gave us the Scriptures in order for us to know him better and to walk with him more closely. We have some very powerful readings today which may have provoked some questions as we heard them. What is God saying to us?

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is speaking to a crowd of people. He declares that there is no one greater than John the Baptist. What a surprise it must have been for them to hear Jesus say this, since their history includes such figures as Abraham, Moses, Elijah and Elisha. Now John the Baptist was being called the greatest? But Jesus is not finished. He adds, *Yet the least in the Kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the Kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent are taking it by force.*

Jesus is pointing out the difference between human status, and status in the kingdom of heaven. Of all *those born of women*, there is none greater than John. Why? Because he is the one who points most directly, most tangibly, and most historically present to the promise of God found in Isaiah: their redeemer, *the Holy One of Israel*. And yet, because of this redemption, where *all* are now able to *see and know, observe and understand, that the hand of the Lord has done this*, divisions and inequality cease for those living within the fullness of the kingdom.

The kingdom of heaven on earth has suffered adversity from the very beginning. Believers from the Old Testament, the New Testament and up until today have faced challenges and persecution for their faith. This has meant martyrdom for many. But it is not always so dire. Sometimes it means that we have interior struggles as we stay faithful to God and his Church. Many of us wrestle with inadequacies when we believe we've failed God. Perhaps we haven't spent enough time in prayer or adoration. Perhaps we haven't been charitable. We have defects and weaknesses, probably too many to name.

But thanks be to God! He knows all that about us. He knows our missteps and faults. And he's given us a path to the fullness of his kingdom *in* heaven, despite our actions, if we continually turn to him for forgiveness through prayer. He has given us the sacrament of reconciliation so that we can be forgiven for our sins. We have a way to reach him through the body and blood of Jesus Christ. God does not want us to fail. He has equipped us from the very beginning to be part of his kingdom of heaven here on earth, and in its fullness in his presence for eternity.

This is the message of hope our Lord has for us. Let us use this time of Advent to turn our hearts toward him through reconciliation and the Eucharist. The sacraments are here to bring us closer to God, and ultimately into his kingdom. They are the best gifts from God, given to his people. Let us accept them as the gifts they are and move forward.

* * *

Friday, December 14, 2018
(Lec. 185)

- 1) Isaiah 48:17-19
- 2) Matthew 11:16-19

FRIDAY
OF ADVENT
- SECOND WEEK
(OBL MEM
Saint John of the Cross,
Priest and Doctor of the Church)

FOCUS: Let us bring prayer and reflection into our Christmas preparations.

It is one thing not to know what we want to order for dinner when we go out to a nice restaurant, because there are so many great choices. It is an entirely different matter when we don't know what we want in life. In the latter instance, we sometimes resort to making excuses for not moving forward in fulfilling the goals we have set for ourselves.

Isaiah speaks of God like a loving parent, setting before his children what is good for them. God shows the people of Israel the way they are to go. Prosperity is theirs if they keep God's commandments. As with many children, Israel has to keep learning the hard way, thinking they know better.

Now it is true that sometimes children or grandchildren understand some things better than older generations. Take, for example, our current phones, computers or any other electronic device. "Truly the children will lead them" rings true here! However, when it comes to showing kindness and compassion, care and concern for others, and general maturity about who and what is good for us, it is best to not rely on children. For learning to do these things well comes through observing the good and not-so-good example of others.

This may be the point Jesus is making in the Gospel today. While on the one hand, we know that to be open to receiving the gift of the kingdom requires having faith like a child, Jesus is chastising the crowds for behaving with childish immaturity, and not making a decision about what they want – refusing to take what is freely being given to them.

We are halfway through Advent, give or take a day, and it benefits us to reflect on how we are doing in our preparation to celebrate Christmas. Are we present with childlike openness, or are we struggling to choose from all that is in front of us, sacred and worldly? So many people are stressed out because they have once again allowed themselves to become too busy this time of year. We might counter that stress by finding the quiet moments we need to prepare a room for Jesus.

There are many ways to do this. We can try combining our prayer time with our gift-wrapping time, taking special effort to pray specifically for the needs of a person as we wrap his or her present. We can reflect on Jesus as the Light of the World as we light up our homes inside and out. In practicing hospitality for guests, we can formulate a habit of welcoming Christ in one another, and into our hearts. We can make room for Jesus in our family celebrations through the use of Scripture, special Christmas blessings and Catholic traditions. Finally, before opening any gifts together, we can acknowledge the greatest gift ever to be received, and the giver who provides it.

This is a season of joy and anticipation. Let us allow God to bring that about in our preparations – that we may grow in our appreciation for all he has done for us. And then let us tell the whole world what we have experienced.

* * *

Saturday, December 15, 2018
(Lec. 186)

- 1) Sirach 48:1-4, 9-11
- 2) Matthew 17:9a, 10-13

Gospel related: CCC 718

SATURDAY
OF ADVENT
- SECOND WEEK

FOCUS: Let us proclaim the Good News of the Lord.

The context and description of the scene in today's Gospel is not without purpose. Jesus and some of his disciples – in this case Peter, James and John – are *coming down from the mountain*. The mountain upon which they had just witnessed the transfiguration of Jesus, and the appearance of Moses and Elijah. A mountain which may or may not have direct historical or geographical reference, according to Biblical scholarship, but certainly has a theological one for Matthew's Gospel.

For on that mountain – that is, high above the day-to-day and temporal reality of the world – the disciples have had a vision of and a proximity to the kingdom of heaven in its fullness. A kingdom initiated on earth but not yet come to complete fruition. Because of this, the disciples cannot remain there. So they descend with Jesus; they descend back to the plains and the crowds, in order to witness to the Good News. But they have a question as they do so – about Elijah.

Jesus answers them, and we are told that *the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist*

How did they understand this? In his reply, Jesus both affirms the scribal doctrine, and expands upon it. We know from Sirach's words today what the disciples already knew about Elijah – he was a man of zeal, a preacher of reform and repentance who prophesied to the northern kingdom of Israel about the coming of the Messiah.

But Jesus' words convey a further truth not as obvious to the disciples: since Elijah's time, the expectation of and anticipation for the Messiah had been corrupted by error and worldly depravity. Therefore a "new Elijah," so to speak, was brought forth by God to herald the Christ. A man of zeal, a preacher of reform and repentance, who would baptize with water before Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

As both prophet, and herald-by-sight of the Messiah – *Behold the Lamb of God*, we know he said – John stands as a metaphor for all of us to come down from the mountain. That is, in baptism and by the grace of the sacraments, we too have had a "mountaintop encounter" with the fullness of the kingdom. The Eucharist is a window into heaven, and a bridge between heaven and earth.

And just as the disciples could not stay on that mountain, and John the Baptist could not help but announce the Messiah when he saw him, we, too, have a role in proclaiming the Good News. Let us pray for the zeal to do so.

* * *

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 16, 2018

(Lec. 9)

- 1) Zephaniah 3:14-18a
- 2) Philippians 4:4-7
- 3) Luke 3:10-18

Gospel related: CCC 535, 696, 2447

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

FOCUS: Rejoice in the Lord, again I say rejoice!

This third Sunday of Advent is traditionally called *Gaudete* Sunday – a rejoicing reflected in rose vestments and the choice of Scriptures. We are more than halfway through our season of vigilant preparation and persevering prayer, as we ready ourselves to both celebrate the coming of Christ in history and look forward to his return in glory. For Christians, this theme of rejoicing lies at the heart of our faith. Even if we are struggling with life's great issues, we are still called to be people of joy and to be ready to share that joy with others.

So what does this spiritual or holy joy look like? Clearly, it is not the same as pleasure or human satisfaction – these are emotions that are short-lived and derived from the external, they are what we perceive and experience. Spiritual joy arises from our interior life – our relationship with the divine. Like a well bubbling up from the depths of the earth, spiritual joy wells up even in the midst of life's struggles and becomes the hallmark of the true Christian.

Zephaniah is exultant in his description of God's faithfulness and promise. Saint Paul, too, wants his community in Philippi to be joyful, not with a superficial rejoicing but with a joy that flows from the Lord as they await his imminent return in glory. To maintain this joy, Paul reminds them to stay prayerful at all times.

Yet in the midst of all this rejoicing, we hear another voice –the Baptist calling us to repentance and justice. But it is the question put to John that catches our attention – *what should we do?* It's a practical question, and John has practical answers. They are not to retreat from life, but be converted to a just way of living. They are not simply to put on sack-cloth and ashes or retreat to the Temple, but be sensitive to the needs of justice – to be sharers rather than takers. Tax-collectors are not to resign but be just, soldiers are not told to desert but to use their power fairly. This is a Gospel of people power, where the message can change the very face of the world.

And what must we do? How can we bring about change in our world? As spouses and family members, we can strive to love with a God-like love. As parents and guardians, we can teach our children that their true value lies not in material things or the latest gadget or brand, but in how they treat others and serve the less fortunate. As civic-minded people, by using our freedom to serve our community. As employers and employees, by paying a just wage and working hard. And as Christians, by being faithful to the Gospel and rejoicing in God's presence and promise! The list is endless – and it is only when we are faithful to Christ that we will know real joy and understand the challenging hope of Advent.

* * *

Monday, December 17, 2018
(Lec. 193)

- 1) Genesis 49:2, 8-10
- 2) Matthew 1:1-17

Gospel related: CCC 437; CSDC 378

MONDAY
OF ADVENT
- THIRD WEEK

FOCUS: In order to understand the future, we have to understand the past.

When we drive down the road, we watch not only what is in front of us, but also what is behind us. “Look ahead and look back” is also what our two readings say today. The selection from Genesis gives us Jacob’s farewell discourse to his sons prior to his death. In this address, he looks forward to the future of his children – whose descendants formed the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Special preeminence is given to Judah, for the land of Judah would become the heart of David’s earthly kingdom.

In today’s Gospel, Matthew looks back at the genealogy of Jesus, starting with the father of Israel – Abraham – and concluding with Jesus, the Messiah. Matthew is saying, “don’t forget the past,” while also noting that there is something special straight ahead. Knowledge of our past makes our future clearer.

On the surface, these opening verses of Matthew’s Gospel may seem little more than a long list of names. But the audience of Matthew’s day was very aware of their significance in salvation history. There are three sets of fourteen generations listed – from Abraham to David, from David to the exile and from the exile to Jesus. The significance of the number fourteen is still discussed by biblical scholars, but the bottom line is that David, the king, is directly linked to Jesus, the Messiah.

Also noteworthy in this genealogy is that Jesus is described in verse one as *the son of David, the son of Abraham*. This recognition of David ahead of Abraham, the father of Israel, makes the point right up front that Jesus is the royal Messiah – fulfilling Old Testament prophecies. In the words of the Church, “Jesus of Nazareth [is] the definitive incarnation of what the Old Testament foretold about the figure of a king” (CSDC 378).

These readings link the first books of the Old and New Testaments. In fact, the Greek words that open Matthew’s Gospel “could literally be translated ‘book of Genesis,’” according to the authors of *The Gospel of Matthew* (Mitch, Sri, 2000). The readings should broaden our awareness of what Christmas really means. It’s not just about a baby being born. It is the significant event in salvation history. The readings show that God has a plan – that he called Joseph to take Mary as his wife, “so that Jesus ... should be born of Joseph’s spouse into the messianic lineage of David” (CCC 437).

In the next week, let’s ponder the plan God has for us, and thus enjoy the fullness of Christmas.

* * *

Tuesday, December 18, 2018
(Lec. 194)

- 1) Jeremiah 23:5-8
- 2) Matthew 1:18-25

Gospel related: CCC 333, 430, 437, 452, 486, 497, 744, 1507, 1846, 2666, 2812

TUESDAY
OF ADVENT
THIRD WEEK

FOCUS: We await in joyful hope, the coming of the Lord.

As we continue through Advent, this third week is one which encourages us to be joyful in our waiting for the Christ child. We are edging ever-closer to the great light that shines on the world in that modest stable in Bethlehem. This is a busy time of year for many of us, and we may have found that the weeks leading up to this one have been anything but peaceful and restful. But as we move deeper into this beautiful liturgical season, it is not too late for us to prepare our hearts properly.

It is not uncommon that when we get busy, our prayer life can suffer tremendously. Those few quiet moments we had dedicated to daily prayer can be pushed aside with the rush of family or work responsibilities, and our preparations for our Christmas celebrations. It would be good for us, during this third week of Advent, to return to the joy we experience whenever we turn closer to God.

Let us look to Scripture for guidance. Let us step into the words of the prophet Jeremiah. They are words of hope; words of salvation. There will be security! There will be justice! Whatever may be happening in our own lives, we will find our strength in the Lord, just as the people of Israel did. Standing amidst the rubble, as Jerusalem's people were sent into exile, Jeremiah suffered greatly as he spoke out against its conquerors. What rubble do we find ourselves standing in today? What is causing us great suffering? Relief can be found in the event described in today's Gospel – the coming of Jesus.

There is much to be joyful about as we anticipate the coming of our Lord – both today, and at the end of time – when we hope to join him for all eternity in heaven. But to be able to withstand the trials of this life, and face them with hearts full of love, we must cling to the One who saves us. Let us strive this week not to allow our daily concerns to cast a shadow over the beauty of the Incarnation and all that we receive through this miraculous event. Let us dedicate ourselves today to make an even greater effort to lean in, closer to God, so that we may be overwhelmed by his gift, rather than by our trials.

* * *

Wednesday, December 19, 2018
(Lec. 195)

- 1) Judges 13:2-7, 24-25a
- 2) Luke 1:5-25

Gospel related: CCC 332, 523, 696, 716, 717, 724, 718, 1070, 2684

WEDNESDAY
OF ADVENT
- THIRD WEEK

FOCUS: God is good and his timing is perfect; surrendering to his plan for us ultimately brings deep joy.

In today's first reading, an angel tells the wife of Manoah – a woman who'd been unable to have children – that she would bear a son to be consecrated for God's special purpose. Her son, Samson, would deliver the Israelites from the Philistines, who had been oppressing God's people for forty years (Judges 13:1).

In the Gospel, we hear about another childless couple. An angel of the Lord announces to Zechariah that he and his wife Elizabeth, both of advanced age, would bear a son to be named John, who would fulfill God's purpose. This John, whom we know as John the Baptist, would prepare the way of the Lord and bring many people back to God.

During their long, childless years, both couples might have felt impatient, sad, and discouraged. Imagine the joy they must have felt when their deepest desires finally aligned with God's plan.

The child born to Manoah and his wife had a role to fulfill at the right time. Samson was chosen by God to deliver his people from their oppressors. We may never know why it took forty years for the time to be right for Samson's birth, but God's timing is always perfect.

Similarly, although Elizabeth and Zechariah endured many years of unfulfilled longing, their child was to prepare the way of the coming Messiah. John the Baptist came into the world at exactly the right time to fulfill the plan God had in mind for him as herald of our Savior.

God knows the deepest yearnings of our hearts. Even so, it's not always about us and our personal desires. Of course we feel impatient, sad or discouraged when our longings don't seem to be satisfied. In spite of our feelings, we can be reassured that God has a plan for us and his plans are always for good.

Difficult as it is to wait, we can trust God. When the time is right and we're ready, God will provide all that's needed for our well-being. We might not get what we want. On the other hand, we might get what we want but not according to our timetable or according to our specifications. Even so, we can trust that we'll be given all that God has in mind for us – and what he has in mind for us is our greatest good. When we surrender our will to God's, we may not always find instant happiness. What we *will* find is a deep joy that comes from being in harmony with his plan.

* * *

Thursday, December 20, 2018
(Lec. 196)

- 1) Isaiah 7:10-14
- 2) Luke 1:26-38

Gospel related: **CCC** 64, 148, 269, 273, 276, 332, 430, 437, 484, 486, 488, 490, 491, 494, 497, 505, 510, 559, 697, 706, 709, 723, 2571, 2617, 2677, 2812, 2827, 2856; **CSDC** 59

THURSDAY
OF ADVENT
- THIRD WEEK

FOCUS: Like Mary, we should place our trust in God and not in the kingdoms of the world.

Ahaz, King of Judah, was afraid. His throne was threatened by the combined forces of Syria and Israel. His advisor, the prophet Isaiah, pled with him to be faithful and courageous, to look only to the Lord for help. The Lord even addressed Ahaz directly, instructing him to ask for a sign that would confirm the prophet's promise to the king of the Lord's protection.

But Ahaz was weak. His mind was closed. He refused to ask the Lord for a sign. He turned instead to Assyria and became a servant of its king instead of a servant of the Most High God. In doing so, he became instrumental in undermining, both spiritually and politically, the very foundation of the kingdom of Judah.

But the Lord would still give a sign, not to persuade Ahaz, but to confirm the truth of the prophet's words: that God would always protect God's people. The sign is: *the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel*. This name means "God with us." And we now know it was not a ruler who would bring God's promise to fulfillment. It was instead a lowly maiden from Nazareth, a poor village in Galilee – an obscure town of about 150 people.

She was afraid, this young woman named Mary. The words of the angel troubled her greatly, and Gabriel had to tell her not to fear. But unlike Ahaz, who disregarded the words of God's messenger Isaiah, Mary listened to the words of God's messenger, Gabriel. And she accepted the sign God gave to her, that her relative Elizabeth – who was too old to bear a child – had actually conceived and was in the sixth month of her pregnancy. Unlike Ahaz, Mary was faithful. Unlike Ahaz, she was courageous, thereby becoming instrumental in bringing to the world a king whose kingdom will never end – a king who will rule over the house of Jacob forever.

No one gathered here is an ancient king or a first-century maiden. But our world is no less one of fear and conflict, where great faithfulness and courage is often required. When we face those moments where difficult decisions need to be made, it is the example of the young girl, and not the great ruler, that we ought to follow. We should place our trust in God and not in the kingdoms of this world. We ought to listen to God's messengers in our lives and recognize the signs that confirm God's promise of protection. We should remember always that Emmanuel means "God with us."

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Friday, December 21, 2018

(Lec. 197)

1) Song of Songs 2:8-14 or
Zephaniah 3:14-18a

2) Luke 1:39-45

FRIDAY
OF ADVENT
- THIRD WEEK
(Opt. Mem.)

Saint Peter Canisius,
Priest and Doctor of the Church)

Gospel related: CCC 148, 448, 495, 523, 717, 2676, 2677

FOCUS: When we accept God's plan for our lives, miraculous things can happen.

We started this week, liturgically, with shouts of joy. *Gaudete* Sunday encouraged us that the Savior would soon be coming. We continue that rejoicing through today's readings, especially in the passage from the Song of Songs. This is a beautiful love poem, using the metaphor of human love as a way to begin understanding the love God has for us. God is the lover and we, his people, are the beloved.

The Gospel continues the theme in this Advent preparation for the Christ child, sent by *God [who] so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life* (John 3:16). Yes, the love God has for us was ultimately shown through the life, death and resurrection of his son, Jesus.

Today's Gospel is an early picture of Jesus, even before he was born, causing rejoicing in the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth, relatives of Mary and parents of John the Baptist. John, still in his mother's womb, jumped for joy at the presence of the unborn but living Jesus.

Both Elizabeth and Mary were participating in miraculous births. They both accepted that God was using them to establish his kingdom on earth. Neither knew what this meant, exactly, but they trusted God, and gratefully accepted his plan for their lives. In addition, neither the older Elizabeth nor the young Mary understood how these babies came to be living within them. Elizabeth was beyond childbearing age, and Mary had never been intimate with a man. All they knew was that God had entered their lives in a very special way, and that love was at the center of whatever would be happening.

As Mary approached her cousin's home the Holy Spirit, who is love, filled Elizabeth, prompting her to proclaim the goodness of the Lord and honoring Mary for her faith that God would fulfill his word. She speaks of Mary's unborn child as *the fruit of her womb*. What a beautiful way to think of a baby! It is like a glorious tree giving its sweet yield.

Today's liturgy is filled with metaphors and poetry. They raise us above the normal conversation, especially as the secular aspect of the Christmas celebration gets closer. May the beauty of these words and images help us all stay focused on the wonder of Christ's birth and the love that is ours every day.

* * *

Saturday, December 22, 2018
(Lec. 198)

- 1) 1 Samuel 1:24-28
- 2) Luke 1:46-56

Gospel related: CCC 148, 273, 422, 706, 722, 971, 2097, 2465, 2599, 2619, 2675, 2676, 2807, 2827; CSDC 59

SATURDAY
OF ADVENT
- THIRD WEEK

FOCUS: Hannah and Mary provide models of thanksgiving through sacrifice and praise for God's goodness.

In today's readings, we see two holy women's responses to experiencing God's favor.

Hannah was barren, and begged the Lord to give her a child. We learn that when her son Samuel was born, Hannah took him to the Temple along with sacrificial offerings. Then, she also did something almost unimaginable: she left Samuel in the Temple. But it is important to realize she was not abandoning her son, but rather recognizing that every good gift comes from God, including children. In thanksgiving for the miracle of bearing a son, she returns Samuel to God, the author of all life. As she leaves, the next chapter begins with her singing a song of praise to the Lord not unlike Mary's *Magnificat*.

That brings us to today's Gospel, in which we hear Mary's song of praise as she exclaims to Saint Elizabeth: *My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my savior.*

It sounds as if the words are ready to burst from her soul to praise the Lord.

Let us imagine Mary at this moment. She has just traveled about ninety miles of rough, hilly terrain while newly pregnant – a true feat, as any mother will confirm. She has arrived at the home of her kinspeople, Elizabeth and Zachariah, exhausted and dirty. Our Blessed Mother, already carrying the infant Jesus, was surely wondering how her story would play out – betrothed and with child, having been visited by an angel and told strange tidings.

And yet, she responds beautifully: with a canticle of joy and thanksgiving that has been prayed for two millennia. *He has mercy on those who fear him in every generation*, Mary says. What was true for Hannah was true for Mary, and it is true for us as well. Our God is a Father who *remember[s] his promise of mercy*, even when our prayers are answered in ways strange-to-us, and even when the answer is a gentle “no” when we want it to be yes.

What we see today is a proper way to respond to God with joy and thanksgiving. Both women worship God, Hannah with sacrifice and Mary with praise, and both glorify God while remaining humble – Hannah in dedicating her son and Mary in her *Magnificat*. The Church teaches us: “To adore God is to praise and exalt him and to humble oneself, as Mary did in the *Magnificat*, confessing with gratitude that he has done great things and holy is his name” (CCC 2097).

Do we give thanks to God, even when life is complicated, difficult or uncertain? With Hannah and Mary as our models, let's thank him now for filling up the lowly – us – with good things as we prepare our hearts to receive Jesus in the Eucharist.

* * *

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2018

(Lec. 12)

- 1) Micah 5:1-4a
- 2) Hebrews 10:5-10
- 3) Luke 1:39-45

Gospel related: CCC 148, 448, 495, 523, 717, 2676, 2677

**FOURTH SUNDAY
OF ADVENT**

FOCUS: In this season of wonder, let us contemplate the gift that Jesus is to us.

Today, as we begin this very short Fourth Week of Advent, the readings give us much to reflect on about Jesus – God’s gift to all of us. Micah tells the Israelites that from Bethlehem shall come a ruler, *whose origin is from of old*, and he will *stand firm and shepherd his flock*, God’s people. The Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that Jesus did not come to offer God *holocausts and sin offerings*, but obedience to his Father’s will. Finally, Elizabeth, formerly barren, is with child and she greets as Lord the unborn child that her young kinswoman is carrying.

Jesus far exceeds our imagination in both his power and his humility. We are assured throughout the readings about the greatness of Jesus: he is to be the ruler of Israel for all time, with greatness and majesty. Elizabeth recognizes him for who he is: the Son of God, the blessed fruit of Mary’s womb.

Yet, even as we recognize the greatness of Jesus, we know of how humbly and quietly he came into the world – born in a tiny village that was *too small to be among the clans of Judah* – and born to a young peasant girl who was also a virgin, from an unknown town, Nazareth. He came in humble obedience to God, and lived his entire life following God’s will – even to the point of rejection and of suffering terribly on a cross. As we learn in the Letter to the Hebrews, through Jesus’ offering of himself and his complete obedience to God’s will, he consecrated a people for God, *once for all*.

As people consecrated to God through Jesus, we can continue in our lives the work our Savior began when he was born in a manger. The readings remind us that God was able to work through a very small town, a humble young virgin, an older woman who was presumed to be sterile, and a tiny baby. This great God – who created a vast universe virtually out of nothing – can also do much in our lives, through our limited resources, time and talents.

So, as we celebrate in three days the gift that God gave us through the Incarnation of his Son, let us also pray that we can be gifts to one another and to those whom God has sent us to serve. Let us pray for obedient hearts, that we might always strive to know God’s will in our lives and to follow that will. Let us pray that, like Elizabeth, we might be enlightened by the Holy Spirit to see God’s work in unexpected places and people.

And let us pray that, like Mary, we can give birth to Jesus in our world today – that through us, Jesus might be the Shepherd of the troubled souls whom we encounter in our daily lives. May we at all times, throughout our lives, allow Jesus to do the will of God through us, in whatever big or small way he chooses.

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Monday, December 24, 2018
(Lec. 200)

- 1) 2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16
- 2) Luke 1:67-79

Gospel related: CCC 422, 523, 706, 717

MONDAY
OF ADVENT
- FOURTH WEEK

FOCUS: The Light of Christ has come into the world to illuminate our darkness.

Today concludes the fourth week of Advent. We have been waiting and preparing for the celebration of the birth of our Savior and his coming at the end of time. These days of preparation may have brought us a mixture of joyful moments, and possibly some difficulties as well. Life can be like that. Yet we still have much for which to be thankful. Our Advent waiting may be compared to a time of pregnancy; a time of joy and longing, yet one which can hold the potential for suffering and pain. We may even begin to wonder if our waiting for our Savior will ever end.

The fact is that joy and suffering are necessary ingredients in our preparation to welcome the Savior of the World into our hearts. We are not alone if we think that we have difficulty preparing to receive Emmanuel, "God with us," into our lives Advent after Advent.

In our first reading, King David stumbles in his efforts to prepare a place for God in his life. He is a great king, and he assumes that he knows what God needs. God disagrees. David thinks he should build a house for God that is equal to or better than his new palace of cedar. God thinks differently. God instead recalls for David the marvelous deeds that God has and will bring about. It was God who did everything for David – taking him from the pasture and making him king. God reminds him of his promises to provide for David's prosperity with a homeland, as well as protection from their enemies. God wants David to realize that everything that he is and all that he has accomplished is the result of God's initiative, not David's.

In our Gospel reading today, Zechariah does just the opposite of David, as we see. He sings a song of praise to God – not only for the gift of his newborn son, John – but for all that God has done in faithfulness to the covenant with Abraham and his descendants. As we look to the birth of our Savior and to the unfolding of the Christmas season, we, too, have the opportunity to remember all that God has accomplished in our lives. The Canticle of Zechariah can be our song of preparation as we wait these final few hours for the coming of our Savior, both now and at the end of time. His song can help bring our Advent to a fruitful close just as it does in today's Gospel passage.

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Three Homilies are given for the Solemnity of Christmas: Vigil, Night, and Day ~ Holy Day of Obligation.

CHRISTMAS, 2018 - VIGIL

(Lec. 13)

- 1) Isaiah 62:1-5
- 2) Acts 13:16-17, 22-25
- 3) Matthew 1:1-25 or 1:18-25

Gospel related: **CCC** 333, 430, 437, 452, 486, 497, 744, 1507, 1846, 2666, 2812; **CSDC** 378

**THE NATIVITY
OF THE LORD
- SOLEMNITY
(Vigil Mass)**

FOCUS: God has a plan – a plan to offer us salvation and fill us with his love.

A difficult challenge in many Christian circles is to attempt to read the whole Bible in a year. In doing this, a person begins with the Book of Genesis with the creation of the world and ends with the new heavens and the new earth in Revelation; they begin with Adam and end with Jesus. What becomes abundantly clear as a person works their way through the Bible is that this is a love story. The entire Bible is a love story, a real-life tale of God seeking after us. From the very beginning of time, God has had a plan – a plan to offer us salvation and to fill us with his love. That plan finds its realization today. God has entered into human history, He has taken on our nature; he is Emmanuel – God is with us.

Today we celebrate the fact that God has pursued us with reckless love. That throughout all of human history, he never gave up on us, but continued to call us into a relationship with him. The glory that we experience today is that Jesus freely chose to take on our nature in order to offer us salvation. *No more shall people call you “Forsaken,” or your land “Desolate,”* Isaiah says, *but you shall be called “My Delight”, and your land “Espoused.” For the Lord delights in you.* This delight is not just a feeling or sentiment, but has resulted in action – today Jesus Christ is born for us.

But we must recognize that God will never force himself upon us. He will call and invite, but never demand. Joseph models a proper response to God’s invitation. Even when he doesn’t completely understand, even when he’s confused about how or why God is acting in a certain way, he still chooses to obey. Because of this, Joseph took Mary into his home to care for her and protect her, and Jesus was born. The angel had promised him, *She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.* When we participate and obey God’s plan for us, amazing things will happen.

As we celebrate God’s love for us during this Christmas season, we recognize that God wants to work in and through us like he did with Joseph and Mary. In following God’s plan for our life, we are able to bring Jesus into the world.

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CHRISTMAS, 2018 - NIGHT

(Lec. 14)

- 1) Isaiah 9:1-6
- 2) Titus 2:11-14
- 3) Luke 2:1-14

Gospel related: **CCC** 333, 437, 448, 486, 515, 525, 559, 695, 725

**THE NATIVITY
OF THE LORD
- SOLEMNITY
(Mass at Night)**

FOCUS: In the beauty of Christmas, God embraces our humanity so that we may embrace his divinity.

Christmas is a time of year that seems to naturally encourage us to share greetings of peace and love, revealed in the tender hugs we often exchange with one another. We share these expressions of mutual affection as a way of showing our love and support for one another, and as a way to grow in relationship with one another. There is something about the words and gestures that we exchange at Christmas that reveals a sort of vulnerability that we might not otherwise show at other times of the year.

The vulnerability and love that we so easily show one another at Christmas mirrors God's own vulnerability and love for us in the great mystery of the Incarnation. Each year at Christmas, we recall that the Son of God has embraced us and all humanity in a tender yet powerful way.

When Jesus was born in the Bethlehem manger, God came to us with a human face. In the Incarnation, the all-powerful God of the Universe embraced the fragile human race as a tiny, vulnerable baby. In a manner beyond the power of speech, God shared a greeting of peace with us on that first Christmas night, and drew us into a warm and loving embrace.

At Christmas, we remember that God not only chose to embrace us, but that he wanted to do so. After centuries of holy men and women – of prophets, priests and kings, and their unceasing efforts to speak and act on behalf of God – God made a definitive statement, not acting remotely or from a distance, but rather coming in person to show how much he desires a personal relationship with each and every one of us. Just as the tiny Christ child was embraced and lovingly placed in the manger, that same tiny Christ child offered a loving embrace of the entire human race, showing in his tender love a better way for us to live as the children of God.

In the quiet beauty of Christmas, we are reminded that Jesus chose to embrace our human frailty, and to begin the process of lifting us heavenward. In time, his embrace would cause him to take upon himself even our faults and shortcomings, in order to do for us what we could never do for ourselves: be our Savior. In so doing, Jesus encourages us to embrace a better way of living – a holy way of living – a way that leads to life in its fullness. In the midst of the miracle that is Christmas, Jesus teaches us that the fullness of life comes through embracing a way of living that makes us deeply open to and vulnerable to the love and grace of God.

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CHRISTMAS, 2018 - DAY

(Lec. 16)

- 1) Isaiah 52:7-10
- 2) Hebrews 1:1-6
- 3) John 1:1-18 or 1:1-5, 9-14

Gospel related: **CCC** 151, 241, 268, 291, 423, 445, 454, 461, 473, 496, 504, 505, 526, 530, 594, 612, 705, 706, 717, 719, 1216, 1692, 1996, 2466, 2780, 2787; **CSDC** 121, 262

**THE NATIVITY
OF THE LORD
- SOLEMNITY
(Mass During the Day)**

FOCUS: The Son of God shares in our human life and we share in his divine life.

Today, the world recalls that the Son of God was born in the small town of Bethlehem. We rightfully celebrate that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. But do we fully appreciate all the ramifications of this greatest Christmas gift?

Soon after today's celebrated idyllic scene of the birth in the manger – with curious animals, marveling shepherds, adoring wise men – we will begin to see the totality of Christ's salvific mission. This God-made-man lived on this earth for a very short time, and often under the shadow of persecution and doubt (CCC 530). His parents fled to Egypt, innocent babes were slaughtered, kings saw him as a threat, neighbors didn't believe him and critics labeled him as a blasphemer. Jesus preached a message of peace and reconciliation, yet some rejected his words. He restored people to health and brought them back to life, yet accepted his own death on a cross. Finally, he rose triumphant from the grave. We know this Jesus. We know the rest of his story.

Today, the beginning of John's Gospel reminds us of the source of that story – Jesus' divinity. He was God who existed at the beginning of time. He was God the Son who knew God the Father and revealed him to anyone who would listen. He was God who was conceived in human form by the power of the Holy Spirit. Yet he was a God who knew human hearts and understood human frailties. The very purpose of his Incarnation was to raise us up, to save us from our sins, to put us back into right relationship with God, and to give us, once again, a share in the divine life. *God has spoken to us through the Son.*

As we busy ourselves with activities today, let us take time to marvel at our participation in the divine life. Made in God's image, we, too, are children of God, born of God in baptism. From the fullness of Christ, we have all received grace. Sinners though we are, we have been redeemed from a life of sin. Self-centered though we may be, we are capable of love. Skeptical though we may be, we have been blessed with the ability to see the good in others. Selfish though we may be, we have been moved to compassion for the immigrant, the poor and the sick.

Long after the manger in Bethlehem and the grave in Jerusalem, Christ continues to share his divine life with us. Christ is present at every Mass we offer, at every sacrament we celebrate, at every blessing we pray. The Word is present when every word of his Scripture is proclaimed. Christ is present in every jail cell, in every sick room, in every lonely corner. He is present when we invoke his name in prayer, and even when we do not. This is how we share in his divine life – imbued with his grace, surrounded by his Spirit, molded by his message. Today and every day, let us be attentive to his sanctifying grace and become what we are truly meant to become.

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Wednesday, December 26, 2018
(Lec. 696)

1) Acts 6:8-10; 7:54-59

2) Matthew 10:17-22

Gospel related: CCC 161, 728, 1821

**SAINT STEPHEN,
THE FIRST MARTYR
- FEAST**

FOCUS: We are called to challenge our own preconceptions and be attentive to ways the Holy Spirit may be speaking to us.

Today's first reading describes the escalation of tension between Stephen and those who ultimately stone him. In it, we find a contrast between one who had no choice but to speak the words of the Holy Spirit, and those who absolutely refused to listen to the Holy Spirit.

As a listener, we know what is going to happen. We know that Stephen will be stoned if he doesn't stop speaking. If we were there, we might even say to Stephen, "Stop. Don't you see that they will kill you?" But Stephen cannot stop. The Holy Spirit cannot be stopped.

Note what the crowd does next. They don't stone him right away. First, *they covered their ears*, and then they rush upon him *together*.

Imagine, for a moment, what type of anger or hatred or fear would drive someone to kill another. Wouldn't it be out of some sort of self-defense? Not, in this case, a *physical* self-defense. No, it is a different sort of preservation. Perhaps they so identified with their own concepts of right and wrong, perhaps they were so sure of their own beliefs, that any other possibility would destroy everything they held dear. Who is this Stephen who would threaten all we believe? What could he possibly tell us? Who is he to accuse us? We will close our ears. We will defend our thoughts, our beliefs. And we will do it *together* – in a crowd, thinking like the crowd, believing like the crowd.

In the Gospel, Jesus speaks of violence as well – the violence that people will commit rather than accept the witness of the Holy Spirit: *Brother will hand over brother to death, and the father his child*.

The challenge for us today is to be open to the wisdom of the Holy Spirit. Jesus promises it will be given to us, and we must, like Stephen, be willing to listen. There is an additional part of this challenge, however, and that is to be aware of any preconceived notions that may obstruct our ability to recognize the voice of the Holy Spirit, no matter how willing we are. This can be difficult.

The Holy Spirit cannot be stopped. We must be willing, *unlike* the crowd, to consider how the Holy Spirit might, just might, be speaking to us. We must be willing to consider the Stephens who may be in our midst, pointing out uncomfortable truths, challenging us to welcome the wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

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Thursday, December 27, 2018
(Lec. 697)

1) 1 John 1:1-4

2) John 20:1a, 2-8

Gospel related: CCC 515, 640, 2174

**SAINT JOHN,
APOSTLE AND EVANGELIST
- FEAST**

FOCUS: Saint John's carefully crafted Gospel enables us to deepen our relationship with Jesus Christ.

Character development, that is, building a picture of each person who surrounds or comes into contact with Jesus, is intentional in the Gospel of John, and it goes beyond what we see in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). Indeed, each individual we meet in John's Gospel is a highly developed and nuanced figure. From the somewhat short encounters with the Samaritan woman and the blind man, to the more major figures such as Peter and the Beloved Disciple, to those who fall in-between, such as Nicodemus, Mary, Thomas and Phillip, the individuals the evangelist uses to tell his story are kind of like characters in a play.

Some of these well-known figures of the Gospel are portrayed as more positive and others appear more negative. But, it would be simplistic to lump them into just such a simple dichotomy: good/bad or believers/non-believers. These individuals are far richer and more complex than that. In John's Gospel, we see so many subtle shadings and nuances of these flesh-and-blood Christians in their communities, that we can relate them to the same kinds of subtle shading and differences in our own faith lives.

The Samaritan woman, the blind man, Peter, the Beloved Disciple, Thomas, Nicodemus, Mary and Phillip are not only unique in their descriptions and development, but also in their stories of personal faith development. Each one of them encounters Christ, and each is transformed as a result. In the Resurrection account we hear in today's Gospel reading, we see this most notably in the person of Mary Magdalene. Her meeting of Christ changes her from a character who is somewhat on the periphery, to that of the prominent role as the first messenger of the Good News that Jesus is raised. Mary Magdalene meets Jesus, touches the risen Christ and proclaims the Resurrection to the followers.

Jesus is the one constant in the Gospel, and the various people we meet in the Gospel stories emphasize his significance. Their understanding becomes our understanding as readers/listeners of this beautiful Gospel. We have come to see and understand who Jesus is through their eyes and their journeys of faith, and their responses can become possible responses for us. We can be like Thomas, Mary or Peter, or even like the Beloved Disciple. There is a place for all of us in this relationship with Jesus. Where do we fall?

On this feast of Saint John, the Apostle and Evangelist, we take the time to celebrate him for his own faith in Jesus Christ, and all he gives to the Church in his writings. His carefully crafted Gospel enables us to deepen our relationship with Jesus Christ. In it we find ourselves, and our own journeys of faith, and can find comfort in the sense that even if we aren't perfect, we can grow. This Gospel gives us hope and life. For as John says: *But these [things] are written that you may [come to] believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name (20:31).*

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Friday, December 28, 2018

(Lec. 698)

1) 1 John 1:5–2:2

2) Matthew 2:13-18

Gospel related: CCC 333, 530

**THE HOLY
INNOCENTS,
MARTYRS
- FEAST**

FOCUS: Like Jesus, we are called to bring light into our troubled world.

Early in this joyful Christmas season – while we are still surrounded by festive lights and the atmosphere of joy and celebration – the Church confronts us with the stark realization that darkness, evil and sorrow are still at work in the world. Jesus’ birth brings about the “opposition of darkness to the light” (CCC 530), as Herod, in insecurity and rage, sends his men to kill all the boys in Bethlehem who are of Jesus’ approximate age. Eventually, the powers of darkness will kill Jesus, too – after he has begun his mission of proclaiming the reign of God through preaching and miraculous works – but this time the Light will overpower the darkness through his Resurrection.

As difficult as this Gospel is to hear in the midst of our Christmas celebration, it is a real reminder that God’s love, light and truth will face opposition in this world. At times, the darkness seems to be winning. We know that from our own experience today. The people of our world face the darkness of war, cruelty, violence, poverty, human trafficking and so many other ills brought on by human beings.

John’s Letter helps us to address the darkness we find in our world, and in our own lives and hearts. He reminds us, first of all, that we are all sinners and that if we believe we are not, we are deceiving ourselves. Before we can speak to other people whose sins and actions are adding to the darkness of the world, we as Christians need to acknowledge our own sins, our own ways of turning away from God. As Catholics, we have the wonderful sacrament of reconciliation to help us examine our conscience, turn to our Advocate, Jesus, and receive his absolution – bringing us once again into the light. This allows us to walk in truth and light with Jesus and our fellow Christians, and to work with others to bring light into the world – wherever we live and however we can.

Let us resolve, in this beautiful Christmas season of light and of love, to keep Jesus’ light burning in our hearts. With this light, we can allow Jesus to work through us, bringing light and truth into the hearts of those around us and around the world.

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Saturday, December 29, 2018
(Lec. 202)

- 1) 1 John 2:3-11
- 2) Luke 2:22-35

THE FIFTH DAY
WITHIN THE OCTAVE
OF THE NATIVITY
OF THE LORD
(Opt. Mem.
Saint Thomas Becket,
Bishop and Martyr)

Gospel related: CCC 149, 529, 575, 583, 587, 618, 695, 711, 713

FOCUS: Our relationship with Jesus is revealed in the Temple by the words of Simeon.

Scripture tells us that Simeon *came in the Spirit into the temple* and was present when Joseph and Mary brought Jesus to be consecrated to the Lord. As he held the infant Jesus, he submitted the end of his earthly life to God because the One whom he had been awaiting had finally arrived. We learn from Luke that Simeon was *righteous and devout, awaiting the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him*. We cannot miss the presence of the Holy Spirit in this great event!

We also rejoice in the coming of Jesus – both now as we recall his birth, and in the future at his Second Coming. And we, too, have great cause for this joy. The presence of the Christ child, bringing a new advent, a kingdom of compassion, mercy, love and salvation, has the power to transform not only us, but our whole world. Simeon calls Jesus, *a light to reveal [God] to the nations and the glory of [God's] people Israel*.

It is important to note that God's revelation of his son, Jesus, is one meant for all people, for all time. There is no one outside his view. And we are in a privileged position, as was Simeon, to give testimony through our faith, that he, indeed, is the glory of God. This may sound like a lofty ideal, but it is what we are called to do as disciples of Christ. Each time our love of God is evidenced through our words or actions, we give birth to the name of Jesus in the circles in which we move. We are more prepared to do this, the closer we grow to Christ.

As we move through this octave of the nativity, it is a good time for us to reflect on our own relationship with God, and our role as a disciple. Where in our own lives do we reveal our belief in Jesus? How do we, like Simeon, point to Christ with absolute awe and say, "I am ready now Lord, because I have seen your Son!" This remarkable event in the Temple reveals an intimate connection between Simeon and Jesus, as well as the connection between Jesus and us. To hold the Christ child so close to our own heart can be transformative, as we contemplate our union with him.

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SUNDAY, DECEMBER 30, 2018

(Lec. 17)

1) 1 Samuel 1:20-22, 24-28

2) 1 John 3:1-2, 21,24

3) Luke 2:41-52

Gospel related: **CCC** 472, 503, 517, 531, 534, 583, 2196, 2599 **CSDC** 259

**THE HOLY FAMILY
OF JESUS, MARY
AND JOSEPH
- FEAST**

FOCUS: To walk in the path of the Holy Family is to imitate their holiness, humility, gentleness and deep concern for one another.

The Gospels give us very few details of the daily life of Jesus growing up in Nazareth. Here and there we get snippets of what his early life must have been like, and of course we can fill in some of the missing details from what we know of first-century life in Palestine. As a carpenter, Joseph was probably a man of modest means from the lower middle class. While a member of the Davidic clan, he and his family, and indeed his community, lived modestly.

Today's Gospel passage, often known as the *Finding of the Child Jesus in the Temple*, is very familiar. Here the Holy Family has traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, and on their way home they realize that Jesus is no longer with them. Passover was, and continues to be, the key defining feast of Judaism – a commemoration of Israel's liberation from slavery and the source of its identity as God's Chosen People. Today, it stands as the backdrop to Luke's revelation of Jesus' fullest and deepest identity. Here, the Gospel tells us, Jesus reveals himself as the Father's Son who has come among us to answer the great questions of human experience.

Filled with concern for his safety and indeed with a little bit of righteous annoyance, the parents return to Jerusalem where they find him – not with children of his own age but with the elders. We can all imagine their emotions and fears before they found him, and their relief and joy when they found him safe.

This Gospel, however, is not so much a commentary on family life, but more a testimony to its importance in God's plan for our world. Having experienced the wonder of Jesus' birth, Mary and Joseph do not keep his holy presence to themselves nor closet him away from the world. Instead, as faithful people of the Covenant, they ensure that he is brought up as part of a worshipping and faith-filled community. There, he would grow in grace and favor even in the face of life's struggles and challenges.

Today's feast sets before us the truth that, with God's help and despite all the challenges of life, we can grow in goodness and holiness. Imagine what a difference we could make in our own families if we sought to understand more fully, as Saint John reminds us in our second reading, that we already share a holy dignity as God's children and a holy destiny that has yet to be revealed.

As we celebrate the Holy Family, let us invite Christ Jesus to bring his loving presence into our homes this day – binding us together, healing our rifts and allowing us to give ourselves over to loving God and others. Then we would truly be God's holy family.

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Monday, December 31, 2018
(Lec. 204)

- 1) 1 John 2:18-21
- 2) John 1:1-18

THE SEVENTH DAY
WITHIN THE OCTAVE
OF THE NATIVITY
OF THE LORD
(Opt. Mem.
Saint Sylvester I, Pope)

Gospel related: **CCC** 151, 241, 268, 291, 423, 445, 454, 461, 473, 496, 504, 505, 526, 530, 594, 612, 705, 706, 717, 719, 1216, 1692, 1996, 2466, 2780, 2787; **CSDC** 262, 121

FOCUS: Christ is the Lord of new beginnings.

On this last day of the year, we may reflect on the past twelve months, celebrating our personal successes and mourning our losses. The news outlets will offer retrospectives of political and economic events, grand triumphs in sports, heartbreaking natural disasters and photo galleries of celebrities who have passed on.

But it is also a time to look forward, a time of new beginnings. Massive crowds will gather in cities throughout the world to count down the last ten seconds of the old year and joyously welcome in the new. Many of us will celebrate in smaller ways, with a group of friends or family. Whether boisterous or boring, we mark the start of a new year with hope and anticipation.

So today's reading from the Gospel according to John is highly appropriate to this season of new beginnings: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* The Word, of course, is Christ, through whom all things came to be at the moment of Creation. But God did not create the world and then walk away. He is with us always, and at a certain point in time he entered into our human history to live with us and die for us: *the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.*

Making resolutions for the coming year is a tradition for many people. But it is also often the target of satire and humor, as the list of resolutions looks remarkably the same year after year. We resolve to quit smoking, or lose weight, to learn a new language, or simply try to be kinder or more patient. Life might seem like an endless cycle of repetition. We celebrate in the same way, at the same time each year. We make, and break, the same resolutions. Nothing seems to change.

But something *has* changed. Christ has come. He has given us the power to become children of God, by believing in him. We cannot change by our own power. Our repetitious list of resolutions is proof of that. The only way we can truly change, in a deep and meaningful way, is through Christ. Christ's power has broken through into our world – into our hearts.

As the old year expires and a new year is born, we should remember that we, too, are re-born, as children of God. Across the globe, crowds will celebrate with festive displays of fireworks – light to dispel the darkness of the past and welcome the promise of the future. As Christians, we celebrate the coming of the true Light, Christ our Lord, who enlightens the lives of everyone.

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