

Homily for the Third Sunday of Advent, December 13, 2020, 11:30 AM (Fr. Greg)

When I visit my mother in Fresno California, she always keeps The Game Show Network on. She has certain favorites, whether they're old shows from the past or new ones: Family Feud, Who Wants to be a Millionaire, Deal or no deal, The Missing Link, Wheel of Fortune. We grew up watching TV game shows, but the best, the one that's the Gold Standard of course is Jeopardy, with the correct answer always stated in the form of a question. Shouting the answers while sitting in our living room made us think we would make a better contestant especially when the category was one we knew something about. And we'd all like to imitate that Master host of hosts, Alex Trebek, who sadly passed away last month.

SCREEN: Alex Trebek photo

For 37 years Mr. Trebek was the host of Jeopardy. He was unlike other hosts. He was a gentleman and he was a decidedly lovely and decent human being. Other hosts try to be funny, always joking; or worse, warm and fuzzy, hugging the contestants. He had wit and a dry sense of humor, sometimes a tad sarcastic. As so often happens it isn't until a celebrity dies that we discover the full measure of his or her life, and Alex Trebek's 80 years of life was full. Outside of Jeopardy he traveled the world with his wife Jean on behalf of children's charities and taking part in USO Tours visiting US troops overseas and serving as a spokesman for various charities. He donated millions to universities. Alex Trebek offered this quote on how to measure a person's life: Don't tell me what you believe in. I'll observe how you behave and I will make my own determination.

SCREEN: Special Delivery main screen

This is week three of our Advent message series titled, **Special Delivery**. We are preparing to celebrate the special delivery of God's Son at Christmas. The readings this month give us the answers to the biggest questions we have about life and salvation. In the Gospel reading we heard today, the Jewish leaders traveled to the Jordan River because they had questions that needed answering. And their back and forth exchange is kind of like that of a TV quiz show. They were curious about John the Baptist - about his identity and his mission. And he seemed reluctant to tell them what they wanted to hear - he kept them guessing.

When they asked, Who are you? John answered by telling them who he was not: "I am not the Christ and I am not Elijah." So then they asked the question: Are you the prophet?

He answered, “No.” In their frustration they asked one last time: Who are you??? This was John’s answer:

SCREEN: “I am the voice of one crying out in the desert, ‘make straight the way of the Lord,’

They still weren’t satisfied, so they left in anger as John was baptizing at the Jordan River. The final answer of who John was and what he was doing, was that he was the one saying: prepare! Prepare the way of the Lord! Get ready, the messiah is coming!

And for John the Baptist, the best way for people to prepare for the savior is to take stock of one’s life and priorities, and ask the questions: Do I say I’m a follower of God, but then allow other things in life to take priority over my faith? Are my words and actions consistent?

Those who came out to see John in the desert knew they were not ready for the coming of the messiah. They wanted to change their lives - to go in a different direction and John was there to point the way. Taking stock of one’s life and seeing what needs to change is essential for disciples of Jesus.

Turn away from sin and believe in the Gospel is the essence of Christianity; in fact, it’s what we say when we place ashes on foreheads on Ash Wednesday each year. How then does John’s message apply to us in this Season of Advent? Being baptized is just the beginning.

The call of John the Baptist is as timely for us as it was for the people he baptized at the Jordan. Like them, we need to prepare to welcome Christ, but how? It begins when we are willing to take a good hard look at our lives and see if our priorities are in order - if there is a consistency between our words and our actions.

SCREEN: What is my purpose in life?

Start by asking yourself this question: *What is my purpose in life? Why am I here on this earth?*

Our purpose in life, according to the world, is to live to work, to make money, and to buy and spend and acquire material possessions. Continually buy and redo what we buy. A bigger house, a remodeled kitchen, a nicer car, fashionable clothes, the newest iPhone and computer, and everything we need to keep up with everyone else. We can’t help but be affected by this message, especially at this time of the year. We are bombarded with

the message that Christmas is all about shopping & spending. Resisting these messages is a real challenge.

I can only imagine the pressure that parents face to not give in to the message that love equals more stuff. And we might even feel more guilty if we don't give as much as possible after this year of the pandemic. But life is not like a game show - we don't 'win' by having the most stuff.

John the Baptist is reminding us of our true identity and purpose in life. Who are we, why are we here?

The answer is...

SCREEN: You are a child of God, called to follow Jesus.

We are children of God, called to a life of discipleship. Our purpose in this life is to prepare for eternal life. As followers of Jesus we are people on a mission. We seek the will of God so we can be Jesus's hands and feet and voice in the world. That's what it means to put God first.

When we do this - when we embrace our mission - not only will we be happier now, but we will grow in our desire to be with God forever after. Only God can make our lives meaningful. Yes, only God.

And possibly this is the lesson we've learned this past year with the pandemic? Jobs can be lost, finances can get tight, our health and safety can be compromised. If everything in this world is fleeting and can be taken away, it makes sense to invest in spiritual realities that are lasting.

In these final 14 days of Advent, can I be willing to look into my heart and my life and ask the tough questions:

Is God first in my life or have I allowed something else to rule and control me? Where do I commit my time, my energy, and my resources? These questions must be asked and answered in order for us to live as Christ calls us to live. Let us turn to God with our whole heart. Let us hear the message of John the Baptist, calling us to prepare.

SCREEN: Pray event main screen

This coming Thursday, we invite you to come to St. Pius for an evening of prayer and confession. From 7-7:45pm, our church will be open, the lights dimmed, so you can pray

to God asking for whatever you need - comfort, peace, guidance, or forgiveness. And if you feel so inclined, you can also receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Fr. Mike and I will both be hearing confessions on Thursday.

I know that for some Catholics, confession is a really difficult sacrament. It might help if we don't put all of our focus on our sins, but rather on God's merciful love.

As priests, we don't sit in judgement of the one confessing. We simply stand in the place of Christ, in the name of the Church, to say, "God loves you, God forgives you, be reconciled and begin again." For we are a Church of second chances. And if you don't remember the steps for confession - what to say or do - we will have a handout with all the steps. We all need to confess and receive forgiveness - even priests.

Sometimes it's specific actions that take us away from God and our purpose in life. It can also be certain attitudes that we need to acknowledge and let go of: anger, hatred, indifference, selfishness, being judgmental. If we don't acknowledge and confess these things, our relationship with God and others can be derailed.

The result is that Christ and Gospel values can easily get pushed out of our lives. God's forgiveness in the Sacrament has the power to heal us and bring us back - can restore balance and renew our purpose in life. So please consider taking advantage of this opportunity.

SCREEN: Gaudete Sunday image

Today we celebrate the Third Sunday of Advent, also known as Gaudete Sunday, which means Rejoice. We light the rose colored candle on our Advent wreath and wear Rose colored vestments. Even in the midst of a pandemic, we have so much to rejoice in. Even just recognizing the little things - the laughter of a child, a conversation with a friend, the smell of a Christmas tree and the warm glow of its lights.

One way of truly rejoicing in our faith is to share it with others. Consider reaching out to someone you know who may be searching for answers about life or their purpose in the world. Invite him or her to worship with us online this Christmas.

And to help you do that we've created invitations for you to use - images for social media and ones you can print right at home, maybe even to include in your Christmas cards. Here's one of them:

SCREEN: Christmas Eve invite

Go to the Christmas page of our website for ways to help you reach out to those in your life and help them connect with us this Christmas.

We've got some amazing things planned for our online Mass, which we know will fill others with hope and joy and light. They will be uplifted with our singing, our prayers, our experience of the Lord and our words of faith

SCREEN: Alpha image

And you can also invite them to a program called Alpha. It is specifically designed for people with questions - people who are seeking. We ran Alpha for the first time this past Spring and will be starting a new session right after New Year's. I guarantee there is someone in your life who would benefit from Alpha so consider inviting them.

When you make an effort to share your faith with others, you are expressing your thanks to God for giving you the gift of faith. With all the challenges we face these days, it is so easy to lose sight about what really matters.

Isaiah and John remind us that we have been given an amazing gift in our faith - a gift that must be shared. And when we do, then Isaiah's vision becomes a reality: we bring glad tidings to the poor, healing to the brokenhearted, liberty to captives, and release to those who are imprisoned by despair or doubt.

Today, let us hear the voice of Christ calling us to recommit to putting him first in our lives.