Today we begin the fourth, and final “week” of Advent, which this year, we get to observe almost the entire week. As we know, this very brief season of Advent initiates each new Liturgical Year. But, more than a introductory Season, or even one that just serves to prepare us for Christmas, Advent has its own special nature and purpose. Advent helps to prepare our hearts, that is to make them ready to receive all the graces that God wants to bring into our lives during this new cycle of Feasts and liturgical seasons in this new Church Year. But as much as we might know that, and perhaps each year resolve to “let Advent be Advent”, it’s nearly impossible to avoid the rush and hurry of getting ourselves ready for the “holiday” side of the Christmas celebration which is chomping at the bit to get underway. We almost can’t help but be distracted from Advent by the many hours it take to write our Christmas cards, do our Christmas baking, buy and wrap our precious gifts, and get them ready to be delivered to our loved ones throughout these days.

But for these few minutes, let’s try to briefly focus our thoughts and attention on these beautiful Scripture Readings we have just heard on this final Sunday of Advent, and reflect on the special spiritual Advent gifts that God wants us to have, even in the midst of the busy-ness of our daily responsibilities and life circumstances.

First, there is the gift of stillness. In the next two days we will experience the “winter solstice”---the shortest day of the year in terms of daylight, which means that theoretically, due to more darkness, there is more of an opportunity for “stillness” than on any other day. Advent provides each of us with that opportunity to take time to be still, and to remember that God is our Loving God; to realize anew that our God loves us so much that He comes to dwell among us. Our God asks us to remember in the stillness of our hearts that we are His beloved children, and He is with us always. As the prophet Micah told us in today’s First Reading: “Therefore the Lord...shall stand firm and shepherd his flock....he shall be peace.”

Another Advent gift is Joy. Advent “Joy” reminds us that we are always living in expectation for what is still to come; “waiting in joyful hope” for all the
ways that our God reveals Himself to us. Advent Joy comes from knowing that we are deeply loved by our God, Who Jesus taught us to dare to call “Father”. In today’s Gospel, when Mary visited Elizabeth, there was such an expression of joy when Elizabeth realized that Mary was pregnant with the very Son of God that she proclaimed: “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb...and how is it that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” In addition, the unborn child in Elizabeth’s womb also expressed joy by “leaping for joy” in his mother’s womb.

A third Advent gift to think about is Light. Our Advent Wreath has been getting brighter and brighter throughout these four weeks; it is now complete giving off a beautiful external light that we hope and pray is also reflected within our hearts as well. Of course we all at times experience “dark” moments of grief, pain, or tragedy; and we continue to experience the “darkness” of this worldwide pandemic still maintaining its grip on us in so many different ways. In spite of the “darkness”, our faith assures us that no darkness can overwhelm us when we are connected to Christ, the Light of the world.

Our dear Blessed Mother is such an important Advent figure, and having consecrated our entire Diocese to her intercession, she is our special advocate and our role model. As we think about the gifts of stillness, joy and light, and clearly see each of those gifts within Mary, we might make additional efforts to strengthen our devotion to our Blessed Mother, the first of all believers, and the first one to proclaim the Good News---the first Evangelist. It only makes sense that we should “model” Mary by modelling her faith, her joy, her trust, her submission to God’s will in our own lives. When we are facing fears, when we are confused about the way our lives are unfolding, when we are filled with grief, when we are asked to accept something in life that seems too difficult to bear, that’s when we need to call on our Blessed Mother, because she has been there, and she has dealt with similar issues. Mary will remind us that we too are truly blessed and special in God’s sight. She will remind us that the “fruit” of our lives should be that we allow Christ to be born within our hearts. She will remind us that when we believe in God and trust that He is with us always, we too are helping to build God’s kingdom in this world.

As we conclude this Advent 2021 and prepare to celebrate the true joy of Christmas, I hope that each of us will allow Mary, our Blessed Mother, to be our Model and our inspiration, not just during the seasons of Advent and Christmas, but in all the seasons of our lives. May we regularly and fervently pray the final
part of the beautiful “Hail Mary” prayer, and always know that Mary’s prayers most certainly include each of us: “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.”

God bless you, now and always.