

Welcome, everyone, and thank you for being here, truly. We are more fully the Church when we all gather together, as one Body, to make our offering of worship to God, united to Christ our Head. No one is expendable or not needed in that equation, we all have our unique offering to make, so your presence here today is a gift to your brothers and sisters here.

As our parish members know, we conducted a feasibility study in December to look into conducting a capital campaign that would address the maintenance issues that we have had to put off until now. The response back was very positive, but it also made clear that there are some open questions in people's minds about the state of our parish, so we're going to start a series of presentations after all the Masses, starting this weekend. So after Mass, I invite everyone who is interested to stay in the church, and we'll hear from a member of our pastoral council to introduce that series.

Ultimately, everything we do here at the parish, whether encouraging people to spend an hour in adoration or asking people for their financial support, is designed to help us accomplish our mission, the good work that we strive to do every day as disciples of Christ. Jesus has given us the mission to seek the lost, to welcome the stranger, to love our neighbor, to bring others to him. Part of my role as the pastor is to make sure we stay focused on that. Above all else, it is our responsibility as a parish to ensure that the mission of the Church continues to be carried out.

How we go about doing that will be the theme of this series of homilies over these five Sundays between Christmas and Lent. How do we seek the lost? How do we welcome the stranger? How do we bring others to Jesus? How do we grow as disciples ourselves?

One thing that is important for us to understand at the outset is that while that is our mission, we are not the primary driver. We are just facilitators, cooperators in preaching the gospel. We can sometimes overburden ourselves with the responsibility of our neighbor's relationship with God. If our spouse, our children, our sibling, our friend has fallen away from the practice of the faith, isn't fostering their relationship with God, isn't trying to follow Jesus, we can become distraught and think, "I have to do something! I have to make them see! I have to bring them to God! I have to save them!"

That is a heavier burden than we are able to carry, so we shouldn't try. But more importantly, we don't have to. We must believe and understand that God loves our spouse, our children, our sibling, our friend more than we do, and He is reaching out to them. We must believe that if we are to have any hope that our mission will be successful. If we think this entire burden rests solely on our shoulders, whether as individuals with our loved ones or as a parish with our community, we will eventually despair. For us alone, it would be impossible. Fortunately, God has given us a more manageable role in His plan.

In our first reading, God calls out to Samuel. “Samuel, Samuel!” What does Samuel do? He goes to Eli and says, “Yes, you called me, here I am.” Samuel doesn’t recognize that it was God who was speaking to him. Eli, who does know God’s voice, can help. He can facilitate the introduction. Eli tells Samuel how to respond the next time he hears God’s voice, and then he steps back and lets that relationship develop.

In our gospel, Jesus is walking by, and John the Baptist’s disciples don’t recognize him. Here is the messiah for whom they looked, and they don’t know it. John, who does know that Jesus is the messiah, can help. He can facilitate the introduction. He says, “Behold, the Lamb of God,” and then he steps back and lets that relationship develop.

In both cases, notice that it was God who initiated this encounter. It was God who first called Samuel; it was God who walked by John the Baptist. It was one of his disciples who helped make Him known. That is our part. Eli did his part, and no doubt continued to be a mentor for Samuel, but it was God who initiated and directed the relationship. John the Baptist was still around during Jesus’ ministry, and no doubt still had contact with his former disciples, but he said, “I must decrease, he must increase.” They remained present in the lives of these new disciples, while trusting that God would continue to draw them to Himself.

That is our mission, and it is a manageable part of God's saving plan. Our part is to help others recognize God, to help them see through the eyes of faith, and to be there to support them in that relationship. Our part is to be a channel of God's love for them, to be an example of humbly trying to follow God and readily repenting when we fail. It is not our part to make them see, or our failing if they ultimately refuse. Jesus says to his first apostles, "Come and see." It is an invitation, not a command.

In the upcoming weeks, we will talk about how we can more effectively offer this invitation to others, as individuals and as a parish. How we can facilitate the spread of the gospel? How we can remove obstacles that might keep them from recognizing God's love? How can we remove obstacles that might keep us from being effective witnesses? Finding the answer to those questions will help us make progress in fulfilling our mission.

We have good work, important work that we are called to do. Let us not be discouraged by obstacles that we might see, and let us not be distracted from carrying it out. Let us continue to do our part in making Jesus Christ known and loved.