

BE BOLD

Seek the Lost



2023 - 24



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- We believe your family deserves an educational partner who **listens to you** and who **shares your values**, beliefs, and desires to help form your children into morally aware, critically thinking, high-performing and joyful persons.
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Now that IS bold, God!



Dear Friends,

Jews of the Old Testament were keenly aware of a foretold Messiah. They believed in the promise of our God to deliver them a savior worthy of the Mighty Creator's glory. Instead, in an unexpected twist, God sent them a baby in a manger in a middle-of-nowhere town to a no-name family.

What we learn from this is that there can be boldness in the unexpected. And in that understanding there is an invitation to look at the world and do things that may startle you (and others) to fulfill God's will for your life.

Be inspired by God himself. Be bold.
Love,

FR. DAVE SIZEMORE
Pastor

A handwritten signature in cursive that reads "Fr. Dave W. Sizemore".



Making Disciples & Disciple Makers

45 Granville Street | Newark, OH
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www.stfrancisparish.net



undone

FREEDOM FOR THE FEMININE HEART

Live in Greater Freedom - Encounter Your True Feminine Identity

Join us for the Undone Women's Conference where you will experience a weekend of truth, beauty and transformation, as the knots of Eve's disobedience are "undone" through Mary's model of radical receptivity.

Thursday, January 25, 2024 | 6-10pm

Friday, January 26, 2024 | 6-10pm

Saturday, January 27, 2024 | 8:30am-3:30pm

Register at jpilhealingcenter.org/undone

Conference Speakers



Carrie Schuchts Daunt



Nicole Rodriguez



Melissa Perez

Who is Undone For?

Sisters, mothers, daughters, friends, or any woman who is seeking a deeper and more meaningful relationship with Mary, Our Mother, and the Most Holy Trinity

Topics Are Grounded on Scripture & Church Teaching

The Consummate Creation

The Tangled Truth

Untying the Knot

Living Undone



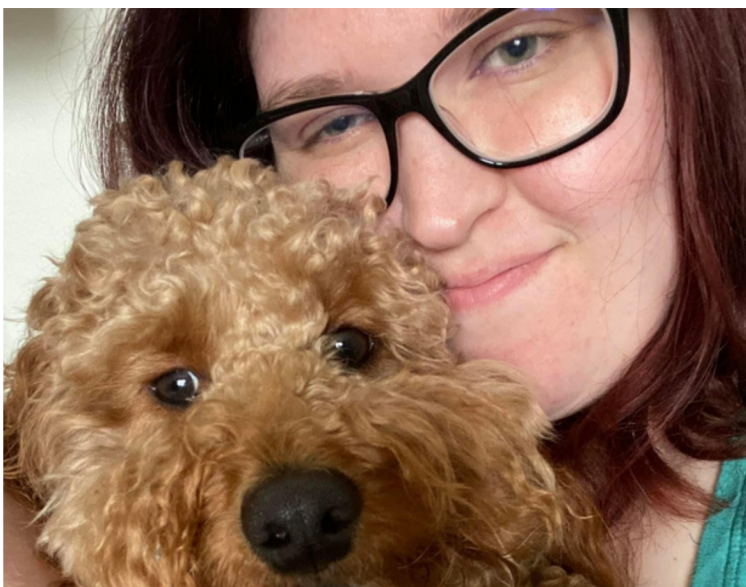
Seek Ask Follow

Ben Lee



Take two steps to your left and you'll encounter someone on Sunday that is at Mass for the same reason as you. Take two steps to your right, and you'll encounter someone with a completely unique story that brought them to the foot of the cross. You could have been born into the Church or reborn to the Faith. It could have taken you two days to say your 'yes' or 20 years.


Regardless of whatever route – direct or back country road - one's spiritual MapQuest (or Rand McNally, for the more seasoned traveler) took, as in Mathew 18:20, "For where two or three are gathered in my name ..." when we are standing in the same place, at the same time, for the same reason, Jesus Christ is what binds us.




This Christmas Season, take a moment to seek out and meet your fellow parishioners, those with whom you stand shoulder to shoulder or follow up the aisle for communion. And when you see Sam in the choir loft or her parish office, say 'hello' and 'welcome.'


This is her story. →

THIS YEAR WE HEAL THE HEARTBREAK







GOD IS CALLING




DON'T HESITATE



GRIEVING WITH GREAT HOPE
Sundays, 12:30pm starting 1/21
Healing from loss has no timeline Find comfort and support from others in this monthly group meeting.



SURVIVING DIVORCE
Sundays in February (start date TBD)
Find hope, healing, and clarity about divorce and annulments and the Church.



SURRENDER THE SECRET ABORTION RECOVERY
Wednesdays, 6:30pm starting 2/21
Find a path to healing from abortion-related trauma through this group of post-abortive Catholic women.

GET INFO AND RSVP AT STFRANCISPARISH.NET/REGISTER



Ben Lee: Can you give us some insight into the kind of church life [and] religious upbringing that you had?

Sam Clouse: We were not religious until I was about nine years old when I wanted to start going to church. All of my friends said they were going to church, and I came home and asked, ‘Mommy, Daddy: Why aren’t we going to church like all of my friends?’ And they told me, ‘Pick whichever one you want,’ and the church of the Nazarene was the one that I picked because it had pretty stained-glass windows. We ended up going there until I was 18.

Ben: [Were] you involved with the church?

Sam: Yeah, I was. So, I started singing in church with my dad playing guitar. My mom joined the choir, so, we were pretty involved. I did the whole Vacation Bible School – everything. I mean we were there four or five nights a week.

Ben: Did you feel connected to that church community at that time? It sounds like, from your answer, that it’s ‘Yes’.

Sam: A lot of people are shocked [that] the answer is really, ‘No’. I just never really felt like I fit into a group there.

Ben: What prompted you to look for another church? What were you seeking?

Sam: The first church move was my parent’s decision. I was still living with them at the time. We started going to [a new church].

Ben: Was it from there that you began seeking on your own?

Sam: So, I was on their worship team for years [and] it [came] to the point where we were glorifying ourselves and we weren’t doing it for God. I’m like, ‘This is not what God has intended for us to do. This is not worship.’ And I told my husband, ‘I cannot go here anymore,’ and he told me, ‘Wherever you go, I’ll go.’

Ben: From our previous conversations you had mentioned you had tried out several churches after that, right?

Sam: Yeah, and that was kind of a disaster. We tried about every single type of church that you could try. We just kept kind of bouncing back and forth until I had pretty much just given up and just decided that I wasn’t going to go anymore.

Ben: What did you feel was missing?

Sam: I felt like everything was about how they could make themselves look good. We went to [a] church and they had fog machines and a literal light show and I’m like, what the heck is happening? Like, we’ve gotten so far from God. I had a genuine breakdown over it.

Ben: So, you're still seeking, can't find what you're looking for, and you said you felt like you were about to give up?

Sam: Yeah, like I told my parents, 'I cannot find a church that I like. There's nowhere else for me to go.' My dad told me, 'Just pray about it. Ask God what he wants you to do and just go in whatever direction he tells you to go and don't question it; don't think about it because I know you, you're my child, and you think too much. Just go do it'. Then I'll never forget, it was the next day, and I was sitting in my car, and I was crying, and I was just talking out loud to God for the first time ever and I'm like, 'Wherever you want me to go, I'll go. We'll be there Sunday morning with bells on, but I need to go somewhere or else I'm going to lose my mind.' As soon as I had that conversation like three million things in life all popped up at once. Like, you're going to go to Mass this weekend. Like, 'you're going to go to a Catholic church.'

Ben: That thought popped in your head?

Sam: After I was done praying that thought popped in my head and I was like, 'No, that's the devil.' Like, 'Nope. Nope. Nope. That's not God.' And so, I went into work the next day and I was talking to a coworker who happened to be Catholic about how we don't have a church and she's like, 'Have you ever thought about just trying to go to a Catholic church? You know, they're not scary and you can just walk in. You don't have to be Catholic to go to a Catholic church.' I had a few other people [who helped] – I had a friend who sent me like a test, and it was all of these like stances on morality and politics and theology and whichever one you fall in to – and [it] popped up as Catholic. And I was like, 'Okay, God, I see the Catholic flag you're waving at me and I'm going to go, but I have to talk my husband into it first.'

Ben: And how did that conversation go?



**It was the most
LIFE-ALTERING
EXPERIENCE
I'd had in my
entire life,
and I knew I was
going to
BE CATHOLIC
UNTIL I DIED**



Sam: It went surprisingly well. We had the conversation that I really felt as if I was being led to Catholicism. So, he told me that if God really wanted us there, then who was he to stand in the way of that? And we went. And I know for me, it was the most life-altering experience I'd had in my entire life, and I knew that I was going to be a Catholic until I died.

Ben: That's amazing – that you felt it that immediately.

Sam: Yeah, because I pretty much had no idea what was going on, but I had heard of the Eucharist and knew Catholics believed in the True Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist [but] it was this foreign concept to me. As soon as everyone kneeled and the priest was praying and consecrating the host, it was like a feeling I will never be

able to describe to anyone in my entire life. It was like I knew that I had never been in the presence of Jesus until that moment, and I had missed out on Him my whole life.

Ben: It just felt right. That feeling is hard to put into words.

Sam: Yeah. And my husband and I walked out of there and we just looked at each other and we're like thinking the same thing, we're feeling the same thing, but we don't know how to communicate it to each other.

Ben: Did you go back to that same church then?

Sam: Yeah, we want back one other week, [but] I didn't want to drive 30 minutes to Mass anymore, so we were trying to find a Church near us.

Ben: In thinking back to not feeling a part of the community and not feeling a part of the churches you tried out how do you feel at St. Francis then?

Sam: I feel like even though we've only been here such a short amount of time like everyone has just accepted us as their family. Even our first Sunday we had someone sitting next to us in Mass and it was very obvious that we had no idea what we were doing, and I still have no idea who this woman was, but she sat next to us and she's like, 'Hi, are you new?' and I said, 'yes' and she said, 'Are you from another parish?' and I said, 'No, we're just new in general,' and she said, 'Oh my gosh, I'm just so happy that you are here – let me pray for you.' Which has never happened before to either of us. And we've never felt so welcomed by a group of people who didn't know us.

Ben: What were your parents' reaction when you told them that you were going to becoming Catholic?

Sam: Nothing but support. I told my dad - he was sick and, in the hospital - and his exact words were: "As long

CONSIDERING BECOMING CATHOLIC?

Year-round sessions
for inquiry & formation

For info contact

David at dclay@stfrancisparish.net or
Kimberly at ksherman@stfrancisparish.net

A journey of faith, that takes as long as it takes.



as you love Jesus and you get yourself to church and you have a good relationship with God, I don't care which church you're sitting in on Sunday morning. That's all that matters to me. If you're happy and you love God, I'm happy for you and I will support you.'

Ben: With respect to the Catholic faith and the Mass, and the parish in general, what resonates with you the most? What do you feel like you are most drawn to?

Sam: I personally am most drawn to the traditions. The reverence that being present at the Mass presents – it's just unlike anything else I've ever experienced. It's truly like we're worshipping Jesus. I just can't describe it. I just love how reverent it is. How reverent the whole church is.

Ben: Do you have a favorite part of the Mass?

Sam: [It's] when [we] sing 'We proclaim your death O Lord and profess your resurrection until you come again.' That's the part that I like the most because that's the part at my first Mass where I realized that I was truly in front of Jesus. [Proclamation of Faith during Eucharistic Prayer]

Ben: What would you tell someone else who is in a similar situation to yours? Someone who isn't Catholic but is on a similar search like you – trying to find a church that makes sense to them?

Sam: Just open up their heart and maybe allow stuff in that they wouldn't normally because most of the time I figured out – when I'm saying no, God is saying yes. [You] have to soften your heart and soften your mind to be open to God's plan in your life. Because it's not going to be what you've planned – for sure. And that [can be] hard to accept.

Sam and her husband joined Becoming Catholic/OCIA in February and received their First Communion and Confirmation on December 18th. We're lucky to have you here at St Francis with us, Sam! Thank you for telling your story.



BE BOLD

Seek the Lost
MEN'S RETREAT



SATURDAY, 1/13

8:30am - 3pm

with Speaker-Entertainer

Joe Melendrez

stfrancisparish.net/Register



Be Bold Be Colorful Seek the Lost

Ben Lee

For as long as school supply lists have been distributed, crayons have been a hallmark purchase. For the youngest among us - and some of the older, too - coloring is an integral part of life. Recent studies have even shown the cathartic nature of coloring; how concentration and patterns or pictures can elicit a feeling of accomplishment once completed, lowering blood pressure and anxiety - whether inside the lines or out. One Parish family has started a project to help share the world of color with those that might not have the tools, all while promoting sustainability.

“I just knew what the end of the year would look like with the waste of supplies and materials,” said Sadie Speiser, a former teacher, and mother to Shep (2), Ellis (4) and Sully (6), all who started in the St. Francis Preschool program this Spring. “I was talking with the boys about ... the crayons

in [their] classroom and what happens to them when [they’re] done. And we were like, ‘Let’s ask Mrs. Mummey if she can reach out to the teachers and try to put a collection box out by the office.’” Nine-hundred crayons later, and after Sully’s favorite part of sorting them, they had enough crayons to send off to the National Crayon Recycling Center in Sahuarita, Arizona.

According to their website, the recycling center’s mission is to, “bring joy to children in those vulnerable situations [through] providing them with an opportunity to escape, even for a moment, into a world of colors and imagination, fostering a sense of hope and happiness.” For the 3 billion crayons that are produced every year by Crayola alone, that’s a lot of shared joy if even a fraction is recycled. When asked how he thinks the kids on the other side of the world feel using crayons Sully helped recycle, he said, “I think they’re happy.”

Unfortunately, most crayons end up in landfills. “If you think about what happens when it gets thrown away, it really doesn’t go away,” Sadie said, and she’s right. The petroleum by-product that most crayons are made of called paraffin isn’t biodegradable and thus, the crayons sit, unused, in a trash heap, once discarded.

The Speisers were not only collecting the crayons to send off for recycling, they were executing their own cycle as well, melting them down in their oven in new molds for reuse personally, or for ‘sale’ via donation. “We have them on display at Gouma’s Candyland in Granville,” she said. “Or in my garage at yard sales,” noting that they are still collecting to-date. “I think in our society today it’s so easy with one click to just get something new and not even think about what you already have and how to use up what you have and I just want to instill that in my kids and not look to get the next new thing ... There is nothing wrong with a broken crayon. It might be harder to use but it still colors. There’s no reason to throw away something that can still be used.” See: Luke 15: 1-10 and the Parable of the Lost Sheep.





Be Bold; Seek the Lost. Sound familiar? Ezekiel 34:16 embodies the theme the Parish has adopted this year. A simple call to action through its interpretation can have many different applications. How many of us have something we love to do but just don't do it? Lost talent. How many of us have wanted to volunteer for that one cause, but just haven't? Lost time. How many of us have that one person we know needs to know Jesus, but we haven't asked? Lost sheep. General examples that can be unique to each one of us, but they all boil down to one thing: lost potential.

We are all called to the foot of the cross to live for Jesus and share with one another the talents we have for Him and His Church. "On coming into the World man is not equipped with everything he needs for developing his bodily and spiritual life. He needs others...The 'talents' are not distributed equally," (CCC 1936). Any charisma, grace, or talent that isn't used isn't simply an individual debit. Just like sin, it affects the whole of the Church – the whole body of its members – through discarding to the landfill of

unfulfilled potential. We all have gifts through the grace of God – it's our choice if we use them. It's our choice if we seek them out in ourselves or even seek out others as disciples to help them realize their potential, both of which benefit us all.

Like the crayon whose potential cannot be used by another crayon, your talents are yours and if left unused, will not brighten the World as intended. Like the crayon who cannot save itself from the landfill, it is up to us to use what we have been given to save the lost who are made in the likeness of God. Left unaided, the crayon might not breakdown, but it certainly isn't used to the potential for which it was made.

"I feel like crayons are a way to be bold yourself, express yourself, be colorful. And [with] all of these lost crayons out in the landfill we could all be making the world more colorful," as Sadie so eloquently put it.

Make your potential kinetic. Make real your talents, and act. Express yourself for the benefit of the Church, ask that friend, do that thing. **Be Bold: Seek the Lost. Oh, and Jesus wants us to be colorful, too.**

**HOW-TO RECYCLE YOUR CRAYONS:
THE SPEISER METHOD**

- Find your local Mrs. Mummy (or another responsible adult leader)
- Put out a collection box and advertise the drop off
- Peel off the paper either before or after soaking for several hours
- Break or cut up crayons into small pieces
- Sort by color (Green is Sully's favorite color!)
- Place into full silicone molds that are oven-safe
- Place in oven on low until crayons are melted
- Remove and let cool for several hours
- Remove from molds, color sharks and rainbows (like Sully and Ellis), and smile!

Christmas comes only once a year but we would love to see you more often.

We literally have something for every age group and every interest! Bring your hearts, bring your friends to visit us in the new year! Call the parish office (740.345.9874) or visit stfrancisparish.net for details!



Gift of Being Grand

1st & 3rd Thursdays each month | 10am
Grandparents get tools to minister to their children/grandchildren.



Abide for Young Adult Men

Tuesdays beginning 1/2 | 6:30pm
An opportunity for men (age 18 - 30ish) to stand shoulder to shoulder to form faithful friendships.



Dead Theologians Society

Wednesdays beginning 1/4 | 7:15pm High schoolers, meet saint-celebs and find your path to holiness. *DTS does not meet on the 3rd Wednesdays of the month.*



Coffeehouse for Young Adult Women

1st Saturdays starting 1/6 | 10am
An opportunity for women (age 18 - 30ish) to form faithful friendships over a warm beverage at River Road Coffee!



That Man is You

Saturdays beginning 1/6 | 7:30am
Donuts, coffee, and chats about how best to lead your family to heaven.



Seeds of Faith Scripture Study

Sundays beginning 1/7 | 9:45am
For busy adults, this scripture study is great for those hungry to learn more!



Alpha Marriage Date Night

Saturdays in January (start date TBD)
Back by popular demand! Dinner for two at a private table and a movie; free childcare is available!



Youth Ministry Kick Off Party

Sunday, 1/7 | 8pm
Middle/high schoolers start the new year off with a night of fun at the trampoline park and weekly get togethers to follow.



Outdoor Adventures Ministry Hike

2nd Saturdays starting 1/13 | 10am
For all ages, gather to enjoy nature and make new friends.



Men's Retreat: Be Bold - Seek the Lost

Saturday, 1/13 | 8am - 4pm
How exactly do we seek the lost? Leverage God's power to rescue souls for Christ, starting with yours!



Young Adults: New Best Friends

Thursdays beginning 1/18 | 7:30pm
Centered around Scriptural prayer and community building, this gathering is open to adults aged 20-35.



Walking With Purpose

Mondays beginning 1/22 | 6:30pm
Tuesdays beginning 1/23 | 9:15am
Girlfriends and their bibles - let's go!



Adults Seeking Knowledge

Wednesday, 1/24 | 7:15pm
ASK Fr. Dave anything! Bring your questions on faith and morality to this fun Q&A session.



Women's Conference: Undone

Thursday, 1/25 - Saturday, 1/27
In partnership with the John Paul II Healing Institute, find freedom for the feminine heart.



Jesus and the Eucharist

Thursdays beginning 2/8 | 6:30pm
Connect with others as you fall deeper in love with our Eucharistic Lord.

TURN YOUR TAXES INTO EDUCATION SCHOLARSHIPS

Emmaus Road Scholarship Fund



DID YOU KNOW?

You can now use your **TAX DOLLARS** to give the gift of an authentically Catholic education at **Francis School**.



100% of your gift will come back to St. Francis School!



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HOW DOES IT WORK?

- Donors who make a gift to the Emmaus Road Scholarship Fund receive a **dollar-for-dollar reduction of their Ohio tax liability** upon filing next year (equal to the amount of the gift up to \$750 or \$1,500 if married and filing jointly).
- **Anyone can make a gift!** Parents, grandparents, alumni, friends – anyone with a heart for making Catholic education accessible and affordable for all. Only Ohio residents will receive the tax credit, but out-of-state residents have the potential to realize a Federal tax savings for their contribution.
- **No gift is too large or too small**, but the Ohio tax credit is limited to \$750 for an individual and \$1,500 if married and filing jointly.
- Your gift can be **directed to benefit St. Francis de Sales School** students.

WHAT IS THIS FUND?

In 2021 the Ohio Legislature passed a law creating a tax credit for qualified donations to scholarship granting organizations certified by the Ohio Attorney General.

Subsequently, since the Diocese of Columbus considers affordable access to a Catholic education a philanthropic priority, the Diocesan Education Corporation (dba Emmaus Road Scholarship Fund) officially was formed and certified as the first Scholarship Granting Organization (SGO) in the state.

REDUCE YOUR TAX LIABILITY

Online:

Visit www.emmausroadscholarship.org or scan the QR code above. Be sure to designate St. Francis School, Newark.

By Check: Mail a check payable to Emmaus Road Scholarship Fund to Office of Catholic Schools, 197 E. Gay Street, Columbus, Ohio 43215. Please indicate on your check that you wish your donation to go to St. Francis School, Newark.



LESS ME - MORE GOD

Maggie Wright

You may know me as Deacon Eric's wife or the mom of those seven Wright children. My family has been a parish member since 2002 and we have always been very active. Our children were in Scouts, Parish School of Religion, participated in VBS, Little Flowers Girls Club, youth ministry, attended St. Francis School, served as altar servers, in the choir, and much more. We attended nearly every social event and picnic, were at all the special liturgies, went to adoration, and when the kids cooperated, and even sometimes when they did not, I was at daily Mass. As a young Catholic mom, I did all the pious things and even became a Secular Franciscan. On the outside my spiritual life seemed to be flourishing. But like many women, I put on a mask. I wanted to cover the shame, sadness, fear, and feelings of being unworthy that bound me.

In 2018, I was at my most unhealthy weight: 349 pounds. I had high blood pressure, was pre-diabetic, and had very high cholesterol. Saint John Paul II teaches in his

Theology of the Body, that the body makes visible the invisible reality. This was so true with me. I wore my sin, my shame, my fear, my unworthiness on the outside of my body and no matter how hard I tried to cover it up, it was present for all to see. The diet culture offered all the quick fixes to help me change my body. I tried them all in the past and a few times I felt they were successful, but I never worked on the reasons why I was where I was physically. I would soon find myself right back where I was before I had started - the body makes visible the invisible. It so happened that in late 2018, I was offered a gift of health coaching to help me address my physical state and embark on a journey to become the best version of myself. Those who have been with St. Francis for a while know I have undergone an amazing physical transformation (150+ pounds lost). I love showing my before and after pictures because they are an outward sign of what has happened inside my mind and my heart. My friends, it is the makeover within my interior life where the true transformation took place. Yes, I worked on diet and exercise because as St. Francis de Sales says, you must "take care of your body so that you may serve Him more

fully.” As diet and exercise chipped away at the outside of my body, Jesus chipped away at my heart. Oh, how I wish you could see it! My life will never be the same and I am so grateful to our Lord for the help He has given me to heal from the inside out.

I have since become a Certified Master Life Coach through Metanoia Catholic. My life started at age 50. What I thought was impossible, has truly become possible with God. It is my mission to teach others how to do what I have done. I desire to show everyone their unique design created by God, to shed the shame cycle, create a healthy relationship with food, manage rather than eat their emotions, and to become the person God created them to be. That is something diet culture cannot teach you.

My friends, do you want to be healed? If you desire to hang up dieting forever, if you would love to lose weight without starving or restricting yourself, if you wish a bad day did not have to result in an eating binge, if you wish to control your life rather than food controlling you, come and see. We will teach you all this and more. Come join us beginning January 14th and ending on April 14th for a beautiful adventure of self-discovery. Childcare is provided with advanced registration. Get more info at our parish website at stfrancisparish.net/Register.

ONLY GOD COULD DO THIS!



Made For
More

**Adapt your Mindset for
Health AND Holiness
Program for Women**

Sundays, 6:30 - 8pm
Beginning 1/14

*RSVP at stfrancisparish.net/Register
Childcare available with advance registration*



**6TH - 12TH GRADE
YOUTH MINISTRY
NEW YEAR KICKOFF**



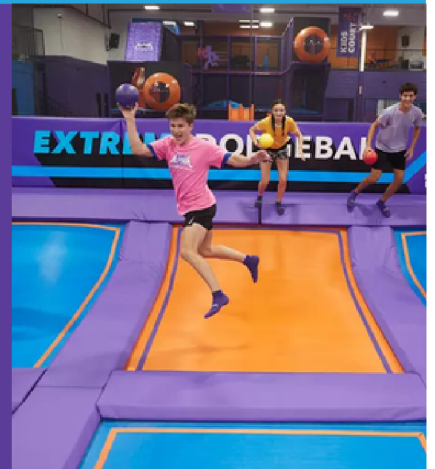
**Sunday, 1/7
8 - 10pm**

Dessert Provided!



Complete waiver at
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Contact Grace for info
gwright@stfrancisparish.net



The Gift and the Challenge

*Adapted from a Hallow Meditation App's
Advent Reflection*

In all the hustle and bustle leading up to Christmas, we can sometimes forget that the miracle we celebrate is not just the story of a sweet baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, but, as author C.S. Lewis once said, the secret invasion of God stepping into enemy occupied territory. Christ takes on human flesh, the king in disguise.

For those of us who have heard this story told and retold over the years, there's a chance we take for granted what a radical event this was for those living it. The interruption of God into the course of human history in a stable in Bethlehem placed the eternal front and center for those who encountered him. For the shepherds, King Herod, Mary and Joseph the choice of whether to follow God or turn away from Him was suddenly concrete and immediate.

It's a choice that each of us faces as well – in every decision we make. Every day, every moment. In the short novel The Great Divorce, Christian author C.S. Lewis imagines that souls in hell are allowed day trips into heaven where they're presented with a choice: to stay in heaven and carry on their journey towards God or to willingly board the bus back to hell. One by one, most of the poor souls-for various reasons-choose to return to hell rather than staying in heaven. One of the saints in heaven explains to the narrator this free choice:

“There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, ‘Thy will be done.’ All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there would be no Hell. No soul that seriously desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock it is opened.”

C.S. Lewis and John the Baptist repeat the same message for us: the time is at hand to choose which side you want to be on. That's both the gift and the challenge of God's decision to bestow us with free will; at the end of the day, it is our free choice that will determine our eternity. As St. Augustine puts it, "He who created us without our help will not save us without our consent." God invites us, woos us, stands ever ready to bestow His grace on us, but He will not trespass against our free choice to respond to His love...or not.

We have had time to anticipate God coming as an infant in the manger and now is the time to anticipate when Christ will come again at the end of time, or even at the end of our time on earth. Christmas is the season that invites us to reflect on whether we are choosing God or turning away from Him.

This isn't a one-time decision either; each day we make decisions that lead us either closer to sainthood or further from it. In our smallest vices and most fleeting virtues, we make choices that shape us more towards heaven or closer to hell. What kind of people are we becoming? How has sin led us away from who God made us to be? And who will we be when Christ returns?

The good news is that we are always met with God's mercy. As C.S. Lewis said, "No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock it is opened."

We cannot achieve salvation or holiness on our own. Ask God to help you desire joy, to seek hope, to knock with confidence.

Considering the nativity story, the choice for each figure in the story is clear: to welcome Christ or to turn away from him. The Church, in her wisdom, also presents us with scripture about Christ's Second Coming to remind us that the story isn't over and our part in the story is undecided. We too are faced with the decision to welcome Christ or reject him.

Maybe the best way to find out how we will respond to Christ's Second Coming is to understand how we would have responded to his first one.

When we hear the nativity story, we can imagine what role we would have played. Will it be the heard-hearted Herod, more concerned with his own power than with God's reign? The cold innkeeper, unable to recognize the presence of God in the needy family on his doorstep.

Or will we be like the wonder-struck magi, attentive to the grace of God at work in the world? Or maybe the humble shepherds, ready to respond to the heavenly message of Christ's birth? Which figure in the nativity story do you most identify with today? Which figure do you wish you identified with more?

How do you feel when you think about Christ's return? Nervous? Awestruck? Spend some time sharing your feelings with God as you close this reflection in prayer with the words of Pope John Paul II,

Lord God, as you did for Mary, Virgin of Advent, send Your Spirit upon us...

Help us to accept, like Mary, the Gift of Your Divine Presence and Protection.

Help us to be docile to the promptings of the Spirit, so that we can proclaim with courage and apostolic zeal the Word Who became flesh and came to dwell among us: Jesus Christ, God made Man, Who has redeemed us by His Death and Resurrection.

Amen!

Enjoy this reflection?

See the Hallow ad on the back cover to see how you can get the app for just \$1!



Think about how you came to follow Jesus and grow in your faith. You are who you are today because someone knew you by name and invested in you and whether it was your parents, friends, or perhaps a priest or small group leader, God has used one or more people to make a tremendous difference in your life.

Being a part of a small group gives you the opportunity to invest — and perhaps make the same sort of impact — in someone else's life. While Sunday Mass, our priests' homilies, formal scripture studies and retreats can be life-changing, seeds of faith are typically nurtured and grown within the walls of the average home in a small group setting. With so much good to be had, it's time to dispel fear connected with starting or joining a small group.

Let's kick off the new year with something bold! How about a book study with this year's parish Christmas gift, [Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist](#)? Or a Chosen TV show watch party? Here are 5 steps to planning and launching an effective home group:

Step 1: Stop the negative thoughts.

Think about it. Who is it that doesn't want you to grow in your understanding and love of your faith? That's right, the devil. Don't you let him win. Resolve not to let anything stop you from doing your small group.

Step 2: Select your small group study materials.

There's no shortage of options! From video series on Formed.org, a book by any Catholic author, or simply just crack open the weekly readings from the USCCB, there are countless choices! If you need a little direction, reach out to Tina Burtch, Director of Faith Formation or to Fr. Mike. They'd love to help you discern a great option for you and your group.

Step 3: Determine the gathering structure.

Thinking of what is realistic for you and the members of your group, ask yourself these questions:

- How many people should I invite?
- How often should we meet?
- Will food be involved? (Are we Catholic? Then the answer is probably yes, but not required!)
- Is there a co-leader that could help me?

Step 4: Be bold - extend invitations.

Don't be alarmed if you get a "no" from someone you invite. There could be any number of reasons why this small group is not for them right now. It likely has more to do with them than with you and most people will simply appreciate being thought of for such an opportunity.

Step 5: Evaluate and make changes as you go.

Especially if this is your first go at a small group — it's ok that it's not perfect. There are no rules; make tweaks as needed.

Step 6: Remember the mission.

The goal of leading a small group is changed lives (including your own). How? Consider this verse: "So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves" (1 Thessalonians 2:8). It's easy to meet and simply discuss information with others, but that's not the goal. You must be willing to demonstrate God's love to the people in your group. Be ready for people to share the messy parts of their lives as well as the polished parts (and to share yours too). This is the true hard work of being a part of a small group, but it is the most rewarding part as well.

May God bless your small group! May it be to His glory and His glory alone!

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