

Reality Check WEEK ONE January 9, 2022

The Church's Christmas season officially ends today.

Which means the trees and our Nativity figures will soon get packed away for another year.

Now, you might not know this but we began planning for Christmas last summer - July 15th to be precise.

This is something the parish staff and I have done for several years.

With so many activities between Advent and Christmas we've found it really helpful to get an early start.

And this coming week we'll take some time to evaluate how everything went.

It's going to be a lively discussion because Christmas at St. Pius this year was full of surprises - things we didn't expect.

For example, at the last minute, several of our key volunteers got sick or canceled.

We also had some staff members who needed to quarantine.

So our plans for Christmas kept shifting.

Mass attendance was another surprise.

In 2019 - which was the year before the pandemic began - 1600 people attended Christmas Mass at St. Pius.

This year we had only had a third as many, with another 500 worshipping online.

SCREEN: Reality Check main screen

So, these two words pretty much sum up Christmas 2021: reality check!

That might describe your Christmas too.

Maybe your travel plans were disrupted, or some of your guests didn't make it.

Maybe your celebrations were scrapped entirely.

And that's just Christmas.

We've all gotten big reality checks over the past two years with work or school or our plans for the future.

Reality checks in life aren't always welcomed - and they can be painful.

But sometimes they're unavoidable and even necessary.

Today we begin our first message series of 2022 titled, Reality Check.

And while I'll be talking about life's ups and downs - like those I just mentioned - our primary focus over the next 5 weeks will be spiritual.

Because when things in life don't go as planned, disciples need reminding of who they are and where they are headed.

Reality checks are opportunities to ask some hard questions.

Questions like,

How do I see myself, others, and the world?

Is my perception grounded in reality?

Matthew Kelly has a great quote about the powerful role that thoughts play in shaping our reality.

He writes this:

SCREEN: What you choose to think about determines the direction of your life.

Don't like where your life is headed,

change what you spend your days thinking about.

He's echoing St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians, who told us that we need to guard our hearts and minds in order to live as disciples - to make room for God and his reality.

Each week of this series we will take a little different focus on how we can do this.

The scriptures we just heard told us how we should see ourselves.

So, let's turn to the readings.

And I'll start with the reading from the Prophet Isaiah.

A prophet is someone who was called by God to deliver a message to his people.

The prophet reminded them who they were and tried to get them back on track.

At the time that Isaiah wrote today's passage,
the Israelites were in the midst of the greatest crisis they'd ever faced.
The mighty Babylonian empire overran their country.
The city of Jerusalem was sacked, their Temple destroyed,
and many citizens were taken back to Babylon,
where they lived as captives for 70 years.

So they were struggling with enormous challenges and had all but given up hope.
If there was ever a time for a reality check, this was it.

And here's what God said to them through the Prophet Isaiah:

**SCREEN: I have grasped you by the hand;
I formed you, and set you as a covenant of the people,
a light for the nations, to open the eyes of the blind,
to bring out prisoners from confinement,
and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness.**

So in the midst of their darkest hour, feeling hopeless and lost,
wondering who they were and where they were headed,
God's message is:

I know you, I'm with you, you will again do great things in my name.

With these words, God was reaching out with love
to grab hold of his children.

Reminding them who they were - a people formed in love
and created to be a light to those living in the darkness.

Called to heal and free others.

It was a powerful reality check to get them back on track.

And it worked.

Their captivity came to an end, they returned home and
began to rebuild their nation and their lives.

Six hundred years after Isaiah wrote this,

God's promise of salvation was fulfilled when he sent His Son as their messiah.

And when Jesus was baptized by John at the Jordan River

everyone there found out who he was.

Because we heard that after Jesus came up out of the water....

SCREEN: heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove.

And a voice came from heaven,

*“You are my beloved Son;
with you I am well pleased.”*

And Jesus’s mission began.

He went out to preach and teach and heal -
to do the very things Isaiah described.

Jesus’s baptism not only made it clear who he is,
but also who his followers are.

Disciples are those who imitate Jesus’s example of teaching,
healing and sharing the Good News.

What’s the reality check that we are being asked to take today?

Well, remember our definition.

A reality check is when you recognize the truth about a situation.

A misconception you had gets corrected.

In just a few minutes I am going to invite you to
stand and renew your baptismal promises.

But in order for you do that, it’s really important to understand
who you are in God’s eyes.

So I want to speak about two distortions that can
keep you from becoming the person God calls you to be -
that chosen servant Isaiah described.

How do you know if your perception is distorted and needs correcting?

Well, start by answering this question:

SCREEN: How do I see myself?

How do I see myself?

When you look at yourself and your life, what do you see?

Do you see the beautiful creation God made you to be

with a future filled with promise and possibility?

That's a tough one right now, isn't it?

The past two years have been hard on so many people.

Between Covid, the polarization in our nation, and the uncertain future ahead, it's easy to feel like the captives in Babylon - hopeless and lost, wondering, where is God?

With thoughts like these, we can all fall into negative attitudes.

Maybe thinking we deserve this or it's a punishment from God.

So your answer to this question

might end up being just a long list of your sins and failures.

And for some people, the way they were raised contributes to this negative view of themselves.

Family members or authority figures kept telling them,

you're a disappointment and will never amount to anything.

Maybe you've heard similar things from those who should have nurtured you.

Maybe you even heard it from the Church.

Catholics of a certain age were raised at a time when it seemed that all the messages at church were about sin and guilt and shame.

I heard a lot of them as I was growing up.

Yes, we are all sinners.

And sometimes we all can fall short of our baptismal calling.

I'm not denying any of that.

But if all you see in yourself is what's wrong or broken, your perception is off -

you aren't seeing yourself as God sees you.

God so loved the world - and you - that he sent His Son Jesus to suffer and die for you.

When he rose from the dead,

Jesus conquered sin and death forever.

He promises forgiveness and eternal life to all who follow him.

Until you see this reality of your faith,
you won't succeed in your mission of loving and serving God.
Now let me mention a second distortion - another false perception - that can keep you from
seeing yourself as God sees you.
And that is thinking you can live your life not needing others.
We have a name for this distortion.
We call it the sin of pride
and we can all fall into it far too easily.
Being fiercely independent leaves no room for others
because their needs don't matter.
Pride even tries to convince us we don't need God.
So we don't make time for prayer or worship.
This past week was the feast day of St. Elizabeth Seton.
Here's a quote of hers that pretty much sums up the attitude we need everyday:

SCREEN: God, forgive what I have been, correct what I am, and direct what I shall be.

-St. Elizabeth Ann Seton

She's voicing the attitude we all need to have.
If you struggle at times to see yourself as God sees you,
St. Elizabeth's advice is don't beat yourself up,
instead turn to God for help.
So today and everyday is an opportunity to recommit and get back on track -
to realign your perception of who you are with God's perception.
And if you're struggling and have some questions about
who you are and who God is, consider checking out Alpha.

SCREEN: Alpha info night screen

Alpha is a program that is specifically designed for those who are skeptical and seeking
answers.

Alpha provides a safe, non-judgmental space for questions and discussions.

There will be an online info night this coming Tuesday at 7:30pm.

All the details are on our website and this week's bulletin.

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So in just a moment I will invite you to stand and renew your baptismal promises and be sprinkled with holy water.

As you do, I want to encourage you to make a spiritual act of surrender - asking the Lord to help you let go of anything that is clouding your thinking or warping your perception.

Surrender any negative thoughts that may be holding you back from the life God wants for you.

And in this coming week, remember today's renewal.

Remind yourself that the words God spoke after His Son was baptized are words God wants you to hear everyday:

You are my beloved child;

with you I am well pleased.

I now invite you to stand and renew your baptismal promises.