

First Reading: Ezekiel 36:24-28 [ICEL]

I will draw you from among the nations,
gather you from exile & bring you home.
**I will wash you in fresh water to cleanse you from all your impurities,
and from all your idols I will cleanse you.**

I will make you a new heart, breathe a new spirit into you.
I will remove your heart of stone, give you back a heart of flesh.
I will give you my own spirit to lead you in my ways,
faithful to what I command.

Then you will live in the land, —the land I gave your ancestors.
You will be my people & I will be your God.

Responsorial Psalm: “God has done great things for us, filled us with laughter and music”

Second Reading: Romans 11:33-36

O the depth of the riches and the wisdom and the knowledge of God!
How inscrutable are God’s judgments,
how unsearchable the ways of the Most High!

For “Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been God’s counselor?
Who has given the Most High anything so as to deserve return?”

For from you, O Lord, and through you and for you all things are.
To God be glory forever. Amen

Gospel: John 4:4-42 (The Samaritan Woman)

[Anna] The first reading from Ezekiel speaks about God replacing our hearts of stone with new hearts and **breathing a new spirit into us. In the gospel story we chose for today, Jesus certainly breathed a new spirit into the Samaritan woman and she used her new spirit, her new heart to spread the good news she received from Jesus**

—that we are all called **to be joy filled** because **God loves each of us** just the way we are
—and we are all called **to share that Good News** with the **rest of the world**

My mother saved everything and gave me a tin basket of all the letters I wrote to my parents from when I first entered the convent. When I read the one I wrote just before first vows, 50 yrs ago. It was really interesting to read what a 20 yr old Sr. Gerard, the novice, had to say.

I smiled when I read that I thought now the hard work of my life is all over

—it will be smooth sailing from here. —I'm sure my parents also smiled when they read that part.

There would be many SURPRISES & *“Oh no how will I do this..”* along the journey of these 50 years.

Beginning with the 56 2nd graders I was sent to teach in Hackettstown the day after my 1st profession. God taught me many things through the primary grade children I was privileged to teach for 19 years which can be summed up in this song.

♪♪ *Surprise, surprise, God is a surprise, right before your eyes. It's baffling to the wise.
Surprise, surprise, God is a surprise, Open up your eyes and see.* ♪♪-----

There was the phone call in Jan of '72 telling me that in 2 days I was going from Williamsport to Pittston, PA. **That was quite a surprise. But I never expected God's call to take me to another religious community the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary.** Since June 11, 1976, the IHM Sisters have been my companions on the journey of surprises we call life.

There were smaller twists & turns in my ministry —from school to parish work —from that to beginning Bethany Ministries with Fr. Peter, —from a diocesan office to doing parish missions & retreats, and the last one [so far] was being hit by Irene AND Lee last August just a week after being on retreat. We never expected to operate our ministry from my 2nd floor apt for more than a few months. [We had to do that for 2 and a half years until Feb, 2014 when Peter moved into a new residence]

I'm sure as you've also been thinking of how you weathered all the **“SURPRISES”** in your lives. **It's only through the people who love & care for us—who walk with us on our journeys of life that we have arrived at today.** All of you, in your own special way have been a gift of God to me & to us. **Without you we would not be celebrating or counting our many blessings.** Your love & support over these many years, *especially this last year*, has helped us to learn to live in the present moment **—the NOW.**

St. Clare advises us to do it this way —to keep our focus our gaze—

Upon the Lord;...his face;...his Life;...his Love; upon the one Who holds us in his embrace and especially to Gaze upon his coming poor from heaven above.

Peter: When I look back over the past 40 years, and gaze upon Jesus, the one the one who became poor so we could become rich, this song is what comes to mind.

♪ ***O poverty, source of riches, Jesus, grant to us one heart with the lowly.*** ♪

It is a Taize chant which I first heard in France in 1993 and it expresses my experience and understanding of what it means to be a **Franciscan** priest – to be called to the ministry of priesthood as a follower of Francis of Assisi. The ministry I have been given since 1972 has been a rich experience of the truth of the 1st Beatitude, ***“Blessed are the poor in spirit, the reign of God is theirs.”*** The Spanish version of that chant is an even clearer insight into my experience: ♪ ***O pobreza! Fuente de riqueza; Señor siembra nos alma de pobre!*** ♪

A literal translation would be something like: ***“O poverty, fountain of riches, Lord plant in us the spirit of the poor.”*** The last phrase of the French version is almost the same, ***“un Coeur de pauvre”*** ***“a heart of the poor.”***

This *Gospel* poverty is not so much about possessions as possessiveness. It is about receiving everything as a gift and refusing to hold on as if you possessed or owned it. It is about sharing what we do have with each other. St Francis was very clear about that. And it is a call we all share in different ways. Like the group gathered here at this parish church of Our Lady of the Valley on the day before Thanksgiving in 2011, I have reason to give thanks to *Irene* for making that call so very clear to me and giving me a whole new experience of having one heart with the lowly. That call to Gospel poverty has always given me a vision of priestly ministry as humble service.

That was clear to me from the very beginning. At my first Mass, on **August 27, 1972** my friend & teacher, Fr. Anthony Fedell, preached a prophetic homily. Some of you – members of my family - were there.

He reflected on why I was called to the ministry of presbyter or priest, why me, of all the people in the city & state where I grew up. Then he said – and I quote his words from the tape my sister made of that day, *“Well, if you want the answer to that you will have to go to the 2nd reading, the short little passage from the letter to the Romans. [which we heard today] And the answer is [and he paused dramatically].... **“WHO KNOWS?”** [and then he continued] **Who knows** the unsearchable wisdom of God? **Who** has ever been the Lord’s counselor? **Who** has ever told God what to do? **Or who** has ever given God anything so as to expect something back in return? **The Lord doesn’t owe any one of us anything. And that’s the mystery of it all.** But it’s also, in a way, the excitement of it all. Because the **only** answer you can give to why anyone is chosen is that it **Pleased God to do so.”***

I have experienced the truth of those words over and over in the past **40** years. I have certainly not been in control of how my life would unfold. I did not plan to begin my ministry in Buffalo directing High School musicals, but just last year some of my former students told me how much the cast retreats we would go on after the musical had changed their lives.

I did not foresee that I would be trained to lead Marriage Encounter weekends by a Jewish couple, or that we would challenge a national movement to engage in interfaith dialogue – that was pure gift and God’s plan.

I did not expect that I would be part of an Ecumenical prayer community that established a hermitage in 1992 which is still functioning.

I did not anticipate that I would meet a sister named Anna in **1980** who would become a full time partner in the ministry of preaching parish missions and retreats **20** years later.

And we certainly did not plan to survive two floods – in **1996 & 2011**. Yet every **SURPRISE**, every experience of “**Who knows!**” has led to new joy & has opened our hearts to receive new gifts. This past year, Anna & I have been calling our ministry a “**ministry of presence.**”

Anna: Today, the gift we celebrate is to be present here with you & your ministry of presence to us – today & over the past years. **And, even more, the gift of God’s presence to us through you and through the prayers we pray together here, the food we will share later on & the stories we tell each other.** As we look at your faces, we see the face of God.

And it is by gazing on the Lord that we have been able to celebrate the gifts & endure the pains of our combined 90 years of ministry. This is where we will find the energy & wisdom to continue our journey. St. Clare’s words to Agnes of Prague put it this way.

♪ **GAZE UPON THE LORD; GAZE UPON HIS FACE.**
GAZE UPON THE ONE -WHO HOLDS YOU IN HIS EMBRACE.
GAZE UPON HIS LIFE; GAZE UPON HIS LOVE;
GAZE UPON HIS COMING POOR FROM HEAV’N ABOVE. ♪