Peace be with you! Life is filled with second chances. We need not go any farther than our scriptures these last two Sundays. Last Sunday was the Baptism of the Lord – a kind of closing to the Christmas season. Although we return to the green vestments of Ordinary Time this Sunday, our Sunday Gospel gives us a second chance to reflect on baptism from the viewpoint of St. John.

Last week’s Gospel from St. Matthew on the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord we heard the command from heaven: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” This Sunday we hear about the baptism of the Lord from the baptizer himself: John the Baptist. “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”

The voice of the heavens so evident in last week’s Gospel from St. Matthew becomes deep and personal in Jesus Christ – the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus is God incarnate. In Jesus, we see God’s face. Jesus is more than a teacher. He is a savior. He frees us from sin. Jesus – God in the flesh – gives each and every one of us a second chance.

What does this second chance look like today? Permit me to share a story from our own PREPARES ministry. PREPARES, as you know, is the signature outreach of our Washington State bishops to walk the journey of life with moms and their children – born and unborn – for their first five critical years. In Moxee, I was privileged to sit with our Spanish language group of PREPARES volunteers. One woman told the story of a neighbor. She’d come to her because she knew that our PREPARES volunteer was involved in the Church. This young woman was pregnant. The father of the child had already made an appointment for an abortion. Suggestively our PREPARES mom asked, “But what do you want to do?” The response: “I want to keep the child.”

What is so significant about this story is the evidence it shows that we are reaching women before they are walking in front of an abortion provider. We still have not compiled the numbers for 2019. But at the end of 2018 statewide we have reached over 12,000 families. We have some level of engagement with a little over half of our parishes across Washington State. We have 525 direct volunteers. We have just under 30 volunteers who are trained as family companions to walk that journey through friendship as well as one-stop wrap around service for women and their children.

“Accompaniment” has become a key word for Pope Francis. What is now happening at PREPARES is not simply giving women and their families a second chance. Moving forward in life, PREPARES embodies the “accompaniment” called for by Pope Francis in his drive to make the Church more mission oriented, more a Church “en salida” – on the move.
As bishops we – and our Catholic Charities agencies – would not be able to carry out the ministry of PREPARES were it not for the great collaboration of so many other organizations such as the Knight of Columbus, Young Ladies’ Institute (YLI) and the Catholic Daughters of America – just to name a few. Likewise, I want to thank the many independent interdenominational groups sponsoring pregnancy centers, material supports for new moms, and basic needs for newborn children have worked with us supporting new moms and their children to uphold the reverence and dignity for the gift of life – especially in the womb.

An interesting detail at the beginning of our Gospel is that Jesus approaches John. “John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” Jesus – the very face of God – approaches John the Baptist. It’s not the other way around. God’s goodness. God’s gift. God’s grace. God’s divine assistance always precedes our own efforts. Note that these words of John the Baptist are the very words we echo immediately before receiving the Eucharist – the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ in all of his humanity and all of his divinity. God comes to us. God approaches us. God feeds us.

What we do and who we are begins – not with ourselves – but with God. I purposely uplift this key point because back in 1970 when Washington State passed Referendum 20 and became the very first state – and indeed – the only state to legalize abortion by popular ballot, I never thought the struggle for the life of the unborn would be so long and become so polarized, so hardened in our civil and political life. What is even more sobering to contemplate is that even if or when Roe vs. Wade may be overturned by the United States Supreme Court, abortion will remain legal in our state because an overturn would return the decision back to the states.

Yet our Gospel reminds us that the efforts lie first and foremost with God – a God who comes to us in Jesus. In an interesting turn of phrase, the great C.S. Lewis in one of his World War II religious broadcasts on the BBC noted that Jesus sneaks into this world “behind enemy lines.” This is what we do. We work behind the battle lines of politics and culture. We sneak in. We anchor our resistance in the Beatitudes of Jesus and his spiritual and corporal works of mercy. In doing so, our defense of life is ultimately not determined by erroneous and deadly incorrect politics and public policy. Rather, it’s rooted in love.

On behalf of our bishops across Washington State as well as the dedicated men and women of Catholic Charities who support our ministry, I want to thank all of you who in any way resist the culture of death and help build up the cultural of life. Thank you for the many ways your efforts in collaboration with PREPARES literally prepares the way for the gift of life – most especially the life of the unborn. Thank you for the many ways you look at the Christmas creche – God in the form of a baby – and declare: “Behold the Lamb of God who comes to take away the sin of the world.” Peace be with you!