Reading 1  Jonah 3:1-5, 10
The word of the LORD came to Jonah, saying: “Set out for the great city of Nineveh, and announce to it the message that I will tell you.” So Jonah made ready and went to Nineveh, according to the LORD’S bidding. Now Nineveh was an enormously large city; it took three days to go through it. Jonah began his journey through the city, and had gone but a single day's walk announcing, “Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed,” when the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast and all of them, great and small, put on sackcloth.

When God saw by their actions how they turned from their evil way, he repented of the evil that he had threatened to do to them; he did not carry it out.

Reading 2  1 Corinthians 7:29-31
I tell you, brothers and sisters, the time is running out. From now on, let those having wives act as not having them, those weeping as not weeping, those rejoicing as not rejoicing, those buying as not owning, those using the world as not using it fully. For the world in its present form is passing away.

Gospel  Mark 1:14-20
After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God: “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.”

As he passed by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting their nets into the sea; they were fishermen. Jesus said to them, “Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Then they abandoned their nets and followed him. He walked along a little farther and saw James, the son of Zebedee, and his brother John. They too were in a boat mending their nets. Then he called them. So they left their father Zebedee in the boat along with the hired men and followed him.

HOMILY
Speaking of fishermen, there were two Southern gentlemen who loved to fish. They heard about ice fishing in Canada, so they decided that they wanted to try it. The lake that they agreed on was nicely frozen, so they stopped at a small bait shop very near the lake and picked up all their tackle and bait. One of them remembered that they also needed an ice pick. After they got all their equipment, they headed out onto the lake. In a couple of hours, one of them was back at the shop and said, “We need another dozen ice picks.” He bought the items and went back to his friend. In about an hour, he was back at the shop again and said, “We're going to need all the ice picks you've got.” The shop owner was very confused and couldn't believe it, so he asked how they were doing. “Not very well at all,” the fisherman said. “We don't even have the boat in the water yet.”

Has anyone ever heard of Pyeongchang [pong-chen]? Well, you will most likely hear a lot about it within a few weeks, as the Winter Olympics begin on February 9 in the South Korean county of Pyeongchang. Now, whether you get caught up or not in the typical frenzy that accompanies the Winter and Summer Olympic games … the events, the highlights and the sudden star-power tend to occupy the national news and sports, and … can you believe? … even the Weather Channel! But there are other fascinating aspects associated with the Olympics. For example, the Olympic torch, quite different from
the Tiki torch that I am holding here but a torch nonetheless, was lit from Olympia, Greece a few months ago and is now on route to Pyeongchang, being carried for over 100 days by over 8000 torch bearers, most of them in South Korea. Carrying the torch was done by runners in ancient Greece, and now the term has come to mean working hard to ensure that a particular belief or movement is not forgotten, but continues to go on, and may even grow stronger. Passing the torch is said to happen when a person retires or otherwise leaves and passes the responsibility to others to go on with the work or movement. And then, there is sharing the torch, with many carrying it together.

In today’s Gospel reading from the first chapter of Mark, Jesus is at the start of his public ministry, after John the Baptist had been arrested. Now we heard some weeks ago, before Christmas, about the Baptist out in the desert proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The idea of being ritually cleansed in water was not new with John’s preaching; it had long been a Jewish purification rite to restore someone to ritual purity. John preached the ritual physical cleansing with the spiritual cleansing of repentance, the changing of one’s life away from sin. Maybe you remember that Gospel passage, people from all over were going to John, being baptized while confessing their sins. But John the Baptist acknowledged that he was only the messenger and one mightier than he was coming, who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. One might say that the torch that was passed to John the Baptist was being passed to Jesus, after the arrest of the Baptist. But it wasn’t just passed, it was made perfect in the teachings and the message of Jesus – the Kingdom of God is at hand! And in today’s Gospel story, Jesus was calling His first disciples, and 3 of the 4 he called, James and his brother John and Simon Peter, became the inner circle of His apostles, of all His disciples. They were the ones closest to Him, and together with the other apostles, they were the ones who were called by Jesus to carry on His work and His message after His death, Resurrection and Ascension, the ones that Jesus passed the torch to. And, as perfect and as merciful and as loving of a message that Jesus shared with His apostles and disciples, even He admitted that it was not complete. In the Gospel of John the Evangelist, chapter 16, Jesus told his apostles at the Last Supper, “I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now. But when He comes, the Spirit of truth, He will guide you to all truth.” So, the Holy Spirit guided the apostles, after Jesus – Jesus said so! But not just the apostles. Looking at John’s Gospel again, chapter 17, Jesus is praying to His Father in the Garden, after the Last Supper, “As you sent me into the world, so I sent them into the world. And I consecrate myself for them, so that they also may be consecrated in truth. I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me.” The torch of faith from the apostles was handed to those taught by the apostles, the early Christian communities, which together became the universal Church, which is still guided in its teachings by the Holy Spirit. That torch, perfected by Jesus as the Good News of the Gospel, is still being carried today by the Church. And it’s being carried to me and to each of you, so that we can carry it forward, as present-day disciples of Christ, as present-day fishers of men.

In the world we live in today, Catholic Christians are constantly being challenged for what we believe. Whether it’s the entertainment industry, co-workers who have a different religion or faith tradition or none at all, or friends or relatives who no longer believe the Catholic faith, or who are spiritual, but not religious, the Catholic faith pronounced by the Church today is constantly under attack, even though it is the faith handed down by the apostles and the early Church. One major problem behind people leaving the faith – who is passing the torch to them? – they don’t know their faith, they truly don’t know their faith, they are not fully aware of God’s love and mercy, of the hope for eternal life with God,
of the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, of the graces in the sacraments, of the knowledge that Jesus is our Lord and Savior, of the Good News of the Gospel. They truly don’t know their faith!

It’s a new year, and many people make New Year’s resolutions – maybe even more than half of us, according to polls. I’d like to suggest two resolutions related to our faith that you might add to your list. First, please try to learn something new about your faith each week. Within a month or two, you might even be able to answer some of those challenges posed by neighbors, family, friends, or co-workers, if you can’t now. Second, try to carry the torch of your faith to someone else this year. Make your flame brighter and share it with someone else. Difficult? Maybe, but consider that over the years, the Olympic torch, on route to its final host destination, has been transported in many various ways: besides the obvious runners by land, boat by sea, and plane by air, the torch has been carried by horseback, underwater by divers, a camel, a native American canoe, and the supersonic Concorde. If so much time and effort can be given to the passing of the Olympic torch, a man-made torch, then maybe the sharing and the passing of our faith, a torch with a divine and heavenly message, can be notched up a bit or two. Think about that, about being a torch-bearer for Christ, a torch-bearer for your faith, when you see or hear about the Olympics in just a few weeks.