

Christmas Homily - Our Lady of Fatima, Delanson, Dec. 24-25, 2013

On the Wednesday before Christmas I was stuck in Hudson after I had done a funeral because of a snowstorm. I was reading the Sunday funnies & having coffee with my brother-in-law, Rod. I found this cartoon about Christmas. It's from the comic strip, Adam@Home. Adam is having a conversation with his young daughter, Katy.

Katy: *"Oh, brother. I need a vacation, or a massage or something."*

Adam: *"What? Why do you say that?"*

Katy: *"I'm under constant pressure this time of year. In particular, this pressure to 'be good'"*

Adam: *"Oh, for Santa?"*

Katy: *"Yes, for Santa. It's stressful! I hear the man is very unforgiving. One slip and it's coal city, baby."*

Adam: *"Well, it must be very hard for you."*

Katy: *"See, I know that was sarcasm.. I'd throw this pillow at you, but I asked for an i-pod."*

Adam: *"Easy, sweetie. Ten more days."*

That cartoon got me thinking about what I wanted to say tonight. It left me with a question:
What is the true meaning of Christmas?

I laughed at the cartoon, because it made it so clear that the true meaning of Christmas is NOT tricking Santa into giving presents. It's not about earning God's love or even deserving the salvation & freedom that Jesus brings. In fact, I think that the popular song we hear so often in this season gives *Santa* a bad name - it does not do justice to the spirit of Christmas or to St. Nicholas who has come to be known as Santa Claus. You know the song I mean, *"Santa Claus is comin' to town."* That is the idea of Christmas that Adam's daughter says is so stressful.

There is another song about Santa that says a lot more to me about the true meaning of Christmas and the real spirit of this season.

It was written in 1947 by Gene Autry (some of you may even remember who he is).

♪ Here comes Santa Claus! Here comes Santa Claus! Right down Santa Claus Lane!
He doesn't care if you're rich or poor for he loves you just the same.
Santa knows that we're God's children, that makes everything right.
Fill your hearts with a Christmas cheer, Cause Santa Claus comes tonight. ♪

The true meaning of Christmas is not earning gifts by being good. The true meaning of Christmas is in that carol, that we are God's children and God loves every one of us.

The true meaning of Christmas is in the Scriptures we heard today. They are a combination of the readings given from the four different masses for Christmas Eve & Christmas Day.

In the Gospel, Luke tells the story of the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:1-20). On Dec. 25 we celebrate his birthday - and what do we do for a birthday? We give gifts. But since we can't give Jesus gifts personally, we give gifts to each other - in a way, that is giving gifts to Jesus - since we are the Body of Christ.

The reading from the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 13:16-17, 22-25) talks about how Jesus comes from a human family (a *very* human set of ancestors) and that he is the one who saves us from sin & death. That's what we celebrate when we celebrate the Eucharist. In fact, we are going to sing a special song right after the story of the Last Supper in the Mass. It is based on an African American spiritual, "*Oh Freedom*" and it celebrates that we have been set free, like the people of Israel & the slaves who were freed in our country. It reminds me of how Nelson Mandela was set free, and how his life transformed his country and the world.

The song - which we will sing during the Eucharistic Prayer - goes like this,

♪ "Save us, savior, save us, Savior, save us savior of the world.

For by your cross and resurrection you have set, have set us, set us free." ♪

The true meaning of Christmas is contained in an old Italian story my sister, Barbara, usually tells when my family gathers at Christmas.

In Italy it is not Santa Claus who comes with gifts, it is someone named La Befana. She was a magical figure who had the important job of turning the world back towards the sun when the days get shorter and shorter in December. She would do this by sweeping with her magic broom.

One December, while she was using her magic broom to sweep the world back towards the sun, suddenly, there was a herd of angels flapping their wings and singing. They sang out to Befana, ♪♪ "*Come with us! We are going to sing/ for the child who will change the world.*" ♪♪ Eh" she said "I'm busy." So they went on without her. Then there was a parade of shepherds & people who were poor and crippled. They too said, "Befana, come with us. We are going to see the divine child who will change the world - who will heal us and who does not care whether we are rich or poor." But Befana still had work to do, so she told them to go on without her. Finally, there was a caravan of people on camels and elephants, led by three royal looking men. They called out to her: "Befana, come with us. A child has been born in Bethlehem and they say it is *the divine child who will change the whole world.*" ". But Befana had not yet finished her work, so she told them to go on without her.

Later on, after the world had turned back toward the sun and the days began to get longer, she thought. "I would like to meet this divine child who will change the world. I think I'll go to Bethlehem." So she baked a pile of cookies and pasta, and took a cart full of gifts with her. But she was old and slow and when she got to Bethlehem the caravan and the angels & the shepherds had left, and she could not find the child.

But Befana had been around a long time, and never let things worry her for too long. She decided that she would give gifts to **all** the children, since any one of them could be the divine child who would change the world. And to this day, La Befana comes on January 5th (the eve of the Epiphany or "Little Christmas" when we celebrate the kings bringing gifts to Jesus). She comes to bring gifts to all children, because any one of them could be that divine child who will change the world. It could be you, or you, or you, or you....

To find the true meaning of Christmas, I need to believe the *Good News* told by the Scripture and the story that everything is a gift and not something that can be earned or bought by being good.

God doesn't love you & me *because* we are good, we *become* good because God loves us. In order to receive the joy of Christmas, I need to see Jesus as one who loves & forgives unconditionally. (And I need to have a better image of Santa Claus than Adam's daughter has when she calls him unforgiving.)

Once we have received the great gifts of love & forgiveness that Christmas promises, we are called to go and do likewise - to love & forgive each other and ourselves - and even to "forgive what is," as one of my friends puts it.

I can't imagine a better image of this than the life of Nelson Mandela which has been in the news so much recently.

The true meaning of Christmas is that the birth of Jesus has brought **Good News** - that's what the word "*Gospel*/" literally means. That's what we hear in the 1st reading (Isaiah 52:7-10).

"How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the one who brings glad tidings,
Announcing peace, bearing good news, announcing salvation."

Will you join me in a song that sets that reading to music? Just repeat each phrase after me.

♪ How beautiful (*How beautiful*) / on the mountaintop (*on the mountaintop*) /
are the feet of those (*are the feet of those*) / who bring good news (*who bring good news*) /
how beautiful (*how beautiful*) / on the city streets (*on the city streets*) /
are the lips of those (*are the lips of those*) / who speak your peace. (*who speak your peace*) /
How Beautiful! (*How Beautiful!*) ♪

First Reading: Isaiah 52:7-10 [from the Mass during the day] *How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the one who brings good news of peace.*

Responsorial Psalm: Ps. 98 [from the Mass during the day] "All the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God."

Second Reading: Acts 13:16-17, 22-25 [from the vigil Mass] *God has brought a savior to Israel, Jesus.*

Alleluia Verse: [from the Mass during the night]

"I bring you good news of great joy/ today a savior is born/Jesus Christ, born in Beth-lehem." (tune: Celtic Alleluia)

Gospel: Luke 2:1-20 [from the Mass during the night & the Mass at dawn] *Today a savior has been born for you.*