

## Christmas Eve 2014

First Reading: Isaiah 62:1-5, 11-12 [from the Vigil Mass & the Mass at dawn] *You are loved!*

Responsorial Psalm: Ps. 96 [from the Mass during the night] "Today is born our Savior, Christ the Lord."

Second Reading: Hebrews 1:1-6 [from the Mass during the Day] *God has spoken to us through the Son.*

Gospel: Luke 2:1-20 [from the Mass during the night & the Mass at dawn] *Do not be afraid. I bring good news of great joy.*

*Peace on earth to people God has blessed.*

*(Complete readings at the end of homily reflections)*

Whose birthday are we celebrating today? When we celebrate our own birthdays, we are not just remembering what we were like when we were babies, we are celebrating our whole lives and we invite the people who are most important to us.

So today, as we celebrate the birthday of Jesus, we're not just remembering that Jesus was born, we are remembering his whole life – especially the way he loved and healed and forgave people while he was on earth; we remember the truth that he loves us so much he gave his life so we could be reborn; we remember the life that comes from his rising from the dead – a life that gives us hope that he still loves, heals and forgives even in 2014.

His whole life and God's gift to us is reflected in the 2<sup>nd</sup> reading from the letter to the Hebrews:

*"God has spoken to us through the Son."*

If God has spoken to us, what is God saying? The Gospel story of the first Christmas is so familiar we can miss the message. We hear the message in many of the carols we sing, but there is a song I like that is not so familiar: ♪ *O poverty, source of riches, Jesus, Son of God, born in Bethlehem.* ♪

That is a chant from Taizé, and it is reflected in some words of Pope Francis:

*"Our faith in Christ, who became poor, and was always close to the poor and outcast, is the basis for our concern for the ... development of society's most neglected members."* (From *The Joy of the Gospel*)

That is part of the message of Christmas. We are called to love *others* the way Christ loves us.

Let's take another look at the Gospel I just read & see what the message is for today. The beginning of the Gospel – the part about the census ordered by Caesar – puts the birth of Jesus right in the middle of history – He was born into a poor family living in a nation that was oppressed by Rome. The message for us is that he still comes today into our own less than perfect political and economic situations.

Then there are those *swaddling clothes*. Did you ever wonder what that meant? It is mentioned twice in the Gospel passage I read, so it must be important. To the people of that time, swaddling clothes were what ordinary infants wore to keep them warm and protect them from hurting themselves. They were basically a square piece of cloth that was wound around the baby – and was big enough to still be used as the child grew. They were the regular baby clothes for the children of the poor. So the Son of God came into the world like any baby, as one of us. And even more, as a part of a family that was poor and vulnerable.

And who were the first ones besides Mary and Joseph to meet Jesus? *Shepherds & animals* were the first ones to receive the good news that a savior had come into the world.

Shepherds were looked down on by the "important" people of that time. They could not always get to the temple because of their work of taking care of the sheep, and they were, in fact, notorious pickpockets.

And what was the message of the angels to them? *Do not be afraid!* That is still the message of Christmas for us today. Do not be afraid of your littleness, of the situations you live in, of your own weakness & vulnerability, of the darkness of sin and pain, even of death itself.

And what is fear? I recently heard a great description: *"Fear is trusting in your own power."*

Mary was afraid when she realized that she could not do what God was asking her to do - on her own. So she began to trust in God's power and really heard the message that nothing is impossible with God.

The shepherds were afraid until they trusted the invitation to come and see the child who had been born poor among the poor. And we are afraid of so many things when we think we have to do it alone.

I was afraid that the ministry I had worked at building since 1995 had been washed down the creek by Hurricane Irene in 2011, until I stopped trusting in my own power.

I realized that Sr. Anna & I did not have the power to rebuild Bethany Ministries. But it was then that we heard the message of Christmas, the message of the Gospel. We heard God saying: The Messiah has come to walk with you and lead you to life and light.

We heard more deeply the news that the angels sang about: *good news of great joy*. During this season when it gets so dark, I sometimes feel depressed and find it hard to feel joy. Especially during this past Advent, when I spent a week in the hospital because of a gall bladder attack, and the rest of the season recovering from the surgery.

What got me through the past weeks was a description of Joy that used to hang in my house near the creek. The poster got washed away, but the message still lives in my heart:

*"Joy is not the absence of sorrow, it is the presence of God."* Or to say it another way:

*"Joy is not the absence of sorrow, it is the presence of Love."*

This message of joy is also a message of peace. *The angels sang, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom God's favor rests."* The word for Peace in Hebrew is *"Shalom."* In Arabic it's *"salaam"*. I can hear another song in my heart: 🎵 *Peace, salaam, shalom* 🎵. (from the album *One* by the group *Emma's Revolution*)

But the Hebrew, *shalom* and the Arabic, *salaam*, mean more than just peace. They mean to be in harmony with God, with each other, with myself and with all of creation. That is what God offered to the shepherds, to all the poor, to children, to all creation.

We sang in the Gloria at the beginning of Mass, *"on earth peace to people of good will."* I think the translation from Handel's Messiah is better: *"Peace on earth, good will to all..."* Those words we hear sung so often during this season are a much better translation of the ancient languages the Bible was written in.

What the words taken from the Gospel of Luke really mean is that peace is offered to everyone. That is the message of Christmas. A message that is reflected in the first reading from Isaiah.

I can sum up the message of that reading in one sentence: You are loved!

God loves you and me. That is the source of the peace that no one can take from us.

The image of that peace, that shalom, is in a reading that occurs in Catholic liturgy several times during Advent. (The 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent, Cycle A; Mass on Tuesday of the 1<sup>st</sup> Week of Advent: Office of Readings for Christmas Day)

They are from the prophet Isaiah, Chapter 11 verses 1-10.

Isaiah writes: *"The wolf shall be the guest of the lamb."* I have some friends to paint that picture.

*[children bring a wolf puppet and a sheep puppet from the congregation]*

**Wolf:** *"Imagine that. I could walk into the flock of sheep those shepherds were guarding, and the sheep would welcome me – and even feed me, so I would not have to have them for lunch!"*

**Sheep:** *"That would be very different from the way the world works today – but I think I could get used to it. Maybe that's what it means when we pray: 'Thy kingdom come'."* *[the animals are taken to the stable]*

Isaiah also says: *“The cow and the bear shall be neighbors and together their young shall rest.”*

*[children bring a cow puppet and a bear puppet from the congregation]*

**Cow:** *“Does that mean I could sleep right next to the cave where that bear was hibernating?”*

**Bear:** *“And my cubs and her calves would play together? That’s amazing!”*

**Cow:** *“And look, that baby Jesus is sleeping in my feeding trough! He is in the manger where we come to eat every day. Does that mean that he will be our food? That he will feed us with his love and mercy and even with his own body and blood? Is that what receiving communion means? Now that is really amazing!”*

Even the animals carry the message of Christmas.

In God’s kingdom they will learn to love and accept even their natural enemies. So we are called to love as we have been loved, to forgive as we have been forgiven, to let go of our old judgments of each other and our grudges and resentments. That is not so easy in families, and even more difficult in the world as it is today. To really pray *“Thy kingdom come”* in the Lord’s Prayer, we need to let go of our fear, to stop trusting in our own power, and begin again to trust the message of the angels, and the grace of Christ.

And, like the shepherds, who went out and told everyone about the child, we are called and empowered to be good news for our families, our communities and for the world by the way we love and forgive and bring shalom, peace, reconciliation and joy. So that everyone we meet can sing:

♪ *Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let earth receive her king.  
Let every heart prepare him room,  
And heaven and nature sing, and heaven and nature sing,  
and heaven and heaven and nature sing.* ♪

First Reading: from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah

For Zion’s sake I will not be silent, for Jerusalem’s sake I will not be quiet,  
until her vindication shines forth like the dawn and her victory like a burning torch.  
Nations shall behold your vindication, and all the kings your glory;  
you shall be called by a new name pronounced by the mouth of the lord.  
You shall be a glorious crown in the hand of the Lord, a royal diadem held by your God.  
No more shall people call you “Forsaken,” or your land “Desolate,”  
But you shall be called “My Delight,” and your land “Espoused.”  
For the Lord delights in you and makes your land his spouse.  
As a young man marries a virgin, your Builder shall marry you;  
and as a bridegroom rejoices in his bride so shall your God rejoice in you.

See, the Lord proclaims to the ends of the earth:  
say to daughter Zion, your savior comes!  
Here is his reward with him, his recompense before him.  
They shall be called the holy people, the redeemed of the Lord,  
and you shall be called “Frequented,” a city that is not forsaken.

The Word of the Lord

[Isaiah 62:1-5, 11-12 – from Vigil & Dawn Masses]

Second Reading: from the Letter to the Hebrews

Brothers and sisters:

In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, God has spoken to us through the Son, who was made heir of all things and through whom the universe was created.

This Son is the reflection of the Father's glory, the exact representation of the Father's being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.

When the Son had cleansed us from our sins, he took his seat at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven, as far superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

To which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my son; today I have begotten you"?

Or again, "I will be his father, and he shall be my son"?

And again when he leads his first-born into the world, God says, "Let all the angels of God worship him."

The Word of the Lord

[Hebrews 1:1-6 Mass during the Day]

Gospel Reading: from the Holy Gospel according to Luke

In those days Caesar Augustus published a decree ordering a census of the whole world.

This first census took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

Everyone went to register, each to their own town. And so Joseph went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to David's town of Bethlehem to register with Mary, his espoused wife, who was with child. He did this because he was of the house and lineage of David.

While they were there, the time came for her to have her child and she gave birth to her first-born son. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

There were shepherds in that region, living in the fields and keeping night watch by turns over their flock. The angel of the Lord appeared to them, as the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were very much afraid.

The angel said to them: "Do not be afraid! I come to proclaim good news to you – tidings of great joy to be shared by the whole people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born to you, who is the Messiah and Lord.

Let this be a sign to you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger."

Suddenly, there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom God's favor rests."

When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to one another:

"Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this event which the Lord has made known to us."

They went in haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger; once they saw, they made known the message that had been told them concerning this child.

All who heard of it were amazed by what had been told them by the shepherds.

Mary treasured all these things and reflected on them in her heart.

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told to them.

The Gospel of the Lord

[Luke 1:1-20 Mass at night & Mass at dawn]