

CHRISTMAS 2021

Again I want to welcome everyone to this joyous celebration of the birthday of our Savior.

A very blessed and merry Christmas to you all!

[At 4:40 & 10:30 pm:] The Gospel story we have listened to is a familiar one:

[At 10:00 am:] The Gospel story which we listened to at the stable at the beginning of today's Mass is a familiar one:

"And she gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger."

We look at the Nativity scene, either here in church or in our homes, and we see a little baby.

Babies tend to enchant us. The wonder of a newborn baby tugs at our hearts.

I imagine that most people can't help themselves when they encounter an infant.

We want to reach out and touch their soft skin and put a finger in the baby's hand, hoping he or she will grab hold with an amazing strength for one so small.

I am especially blessed to have been given the privilege to hold in my arms many babies after I have baptized them.

In my thirty-three years of priesthood I've held hundreds of infants and toddlers.

The joy of it never grows old ... even when they cry!

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In the mystery of Christmas, God has given us his Son to hold close to our hearts.

The fullness of God's infinite self took on the frailty of human flesh as he was born of a humble maiden and was caressed by the rough hands of a simple carpenter.

It really begs the question: "What was God thinking?!"

Pope Francis explains it this way:

"God chose, out of love for us who were lost, to set aside every privilege of divinity and to appear in the most unexpected of places in order to free us from our bondage to sin."

"God chooses to accomplish this through the smallness and vulnerability of a newborn child."

"God decides personally to draw near to us and, in the flesh of his Son, to embrace our flesh."

"In the infant's weakness, God embraces our weakness, in the Christ Child's littleness, God envelopes our littleness."

What a beautiful meditation on the mystery of the Incarnation!

But the child who was born, the Son who has been given to us, did not remain an infant.

The beauty of God's plan also included Jesus growing into a young boy, a teenager, and finally, a man.

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And at every stage of his life Jesus experienced and embraced our human vulnerability:

- From the cold stable, to the exile in Egypt ...
- From being misunderstood by Mary and Joseph for lingering in the Temple, to the death of Joseph and the experience of leaving home ...
- From his rejection by his own community, to his persecution by the elders and those in power ...

Throughout it all, God, in Jesus, wanted to be close to all who experience want or exile, misunderstanding or loss, discouragement or the feeling of betrayal.

And in his Son's Passion and Death, God entered into the depths of human suffering so that through the Resurrection he could dispel the fear of death and restore to humanity the promise of eternal life.

The prophets foretold that, "He shall be called 'Emmanuel,' a name which means 'God is with us.'"

My brothers and sisters, God is with us, here and now, in this place and throughout our lives.

Through Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit, God walks with us and even dwells within us.

Like the humble Virgin Mary we have become "God-bearers," carrying Jesus within us not only for our own consolation and salvation, but also that we might live as signs of hope to a world so much in need of the "good news of great joy" of God's love and mercy for all.

In the words of the Prologue to John's Gospel...

[At 4:40 & 10:30 pm] ... which will be read tomorrow at the Mass of Christmas Day:

"What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

We have lived through the dark days of the pandemic and it may seem at times that darkness is once again spreading ... but we believe that God has already won the victory through his Son, Jesus Christ. He is the Light of the world!

My dear friends, as we are united in wonder and joy before the manger, we also gather in faith around this altar, as the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us today.

This not simply a "Christmas moment." It is the Christian message through the year.

It is the truth that sets us free from fear so that we can love without limit as God has loved us.

My favorite quote from Pope Francis is: "With Christ joy is constantly born anew."

May each of you know this joy of the Lord deep in your hearts as we celebrate Christ's birth.

And may this joy be the light shining in your hearts throughout the New Year. Merry Christmas!