“I proclaim to you good news of great joy: today a Savior is born for us, Christ the Lord.”

Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo

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Christmas – St. Mary’s Cathedral

“I proclaim to you good news of great joy; today a Savior is born for us, Christ the Lord.” Dear friends, the words of the angel ring out across the centuries, and they never grow old. A Savior is born for us, Christ the Lord. On this holy and glorious night, I welcome all of you, especially our visitors, and I wish you a blessed Christmas.

We’re familiar with all the symbols of Christmas: the Christmas tree, the wreath on the door, candles in the windows, lights on the house. All of these tell us that something special is happening. But there’s one symbol that stands above all the rest, that makes sense of all the others: the Christmas Nativity scene. At the beginning of this holy Mass, we blessed the Nativity scene because it is a joyful proclamation of everything we celebrate tonight: the birth of Jesus, our Savior.

Christmas scenes like this one can be found in every church and in many of our homes. We see them on Christmas cards and in public places, even at our state capitol. As Pope Francis says, “the Nativity scene is like a living Gospel rising up from the pages of sacred Scripture.” It is a window into that event that changed the world, and it welcomes us into the moment when Christ was born, when God became man so that man could become like God.

The mystery of Christmas, the Incarnation and birth of the Son of God, is a story of redeeming love. Just think about it. The One who existed outside of time, who is eternal and has always been, chose to be born in time, into the history of this small world we call home. The One who created galaxies and planets became a baby too weak to even raise his head. The One who is omnipotent—all-powerful—chose to be born into a land and a little town that were obscure, far away from the centers of power in the known world. The One who holds all riches in his hand, who creates all and possesses all, chose to be born into poverty, in the manger of a stable, surrounded by animals. The paradoxes go on and on. And we can’t help wondering, why did he do all this, and why did he do this in the way that he did it? The answer is simple: love.

Jesus chose to be born in the simplest and most humble circumstances because of love. It seems so obvious, but on this night above all it needs to be said. He loves us so much that he deigned to come among us as one of us, and he came in the helplessness of an infant. By his birth, he demonstrates God’s willingness to assume the lowest form so that we might not fear to embrace him. And later on, he would die for us, assuming once again a sort of helplessness to prove that he would do anything for us. Kingdoms and empires have come and gone throughout human history. But with the birth of Jesus in the stable, a new Kingdom comes to earth, one that will never fade or disappear. It is the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of divine love, and the little child of Bethlehem is its King.

Jesus was born into a human family, and in this way we see how sacred and beautiful the family is in the eyes of God. Mary and Joseph are that holy couple who came to Bethlehem for the census. They had heard the message of the angel, and they believed. They were willing to accept the Son of God into their lives, and he became their son and their Savior. They accepted the hardship and the mysteriousness of this calling, and God blessed them in ways they could not imagine. As they looked at the child in the manger, they could only have been filled with wonder. They knew he was entirely a gift from God.

Jesus was born in the middle of a hard journey and into the roughest circumstances, a stable meant for animals. Jesus shows that he is one with all who experience need, who have little in the way of material wealth. He shows us the beauty of simplicity and how much we must learn to depend on the providence of God. Jesus was born in the darkness of night, a reminder of the darkness of this world so consumed by sin and sadness. But that darkness was pierced by the light of this newborn child, the one who would call himself the “Light of the World.” With the teaching of his Gospel, he dispels our
darkness, he opens up to us the light of God’s truth, and he makes known the divine plan that God has for each one of us. And in the glory of the angels announcing his birth, we see that God’s glory in this little child can overcome even the deepest darkness and the most entrenched sin.

Our Nativity scene shows us the shepherds who came from the hills. Just imagine what they were thinking. They were simple folk who lived on the margins of society, but here they were, invited by angels to a front row seat at the most significant event in human history. God could have invited many people of influence, but he chose them. We learn that Jesus came for the little ones of this world, the ones who seem small and insignificant but who matter enormously to God. He came to those whose simplicity allowed them to recognize in this child the Son of God. They had the good sense to heed the angels’ words and to go find the child. Would that we could be so simple and so wise.

Brothers and sisters, as we celebrate Christmas this year, as we look into that stable at the baby in a manger, we are right there with Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, and the angels. We too have a front row seat for this greatest of events, when God became one of us, so that we in turn might become one with him. I pray that the birth of Jesus will lift us up, not just for a day but for a lifetime, and that we will be part of this Kingdom of love that began so simply and so beautifully in a humble stable in Bethlehem.