“Do not be afraid… a savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord.”

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

December 25, 2020

Christmas at midnight

St. Mary’s Cathedral, Fargo

“Do not be afraid… For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord.” My dear brothers and sisters, on this holy and peaceful night, I want to wish each of you a blessed and Merry Christmas. We all look forward to this celebration every year, and perhaps now more than in past years, we need to hear this message of the angel: “Do not be afraid … a savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord.”

For so many people this past year has been a difficult one. Day after day, week after week, we have experienced the impact of a pandemic that no one could have foreseen when we gathered here last Christmas. This strange affliction has shown us how fragile and vulnerable is our human condition, and how fleeting the things of this world can be. But it wasn’t so different in the days of that first Christmas, for Mary and Joseph, and for the shepherds. They too were vulnerable to physical illness and infirmity, even more than we are. They were at the mercy of an occupying Roman army. Their possessions and even their lives could be taken in an instant.

But to all of us, to the people of ancient Judea and to us gathered here tonight, our Lord comes in the flesh. As St. Paul tells us in the second reading, “The grace of God has appeared… the glory of our great God and savior Jesus Christ.” For ages and ages, God had sent messengers, patriarchs, prophets, even angels. But this is different; now he comes himself to save his people, to be one with them in their need, and to lift them up from the hopelessness of their lives. He comes not just to deliver another prophecy; he comes to change the world, to change our lives. And by the very fact that he took on our humanity, our flesh, that he was born as we are born, he does change us. He makes himself one with us so that we might be one with God. He enters into this world so that we might enter into heaven. He lives a mortal life so we might live in eternal life.

You might have seen the news story about the appearance this week of a bright star in the evening sky, which astronomers tell us is actually the joint appearance of Jupiter and Saturn. It’s an unusual phenomenon, and some have wondered if this might be the star of Bethlehem that was seen at the time of Jesus’ birth. Maybe so, or perhaps it’s just a cosmic reminder that God continues to shine his light upon us, not the light of stars or a planet, but the loving light of his Son. In the time of Jesus, many thought that the stars determine our fate, that they somehow control history. And there are many who still think so. This year more than most, it seems that our lives are being controlled by impersonal forces outside of our control.

But today as we celebrate Christmas, we know that this is far from the truth. God doesn’t watch us from afar and let our lives be dictated by the whims of the universe. He doesn’t leave us to fend for ourselves or allow us to be pieces in some kind of cosmic game. God comes to us personally and with the most tender love, the love of a Father for his children. He steps into time from his eternity, he comes down from heaven into the finiteness of our world. God, who is all powerful and all knowing, comes to us as one of us, as a child. He loves us so completely that he joins himself to us through the Incarnation and birth of his Son in the stable of Bethlehem. And
yes, he is born as a helpless infant, but he holds in his little, outstretched hand the power to save us, to rescue us from sin and death, to bring us into the embrace of his love. This tiny infant, who appears so utterly dependent on Mary and Joseph, has come with all the power of God to establish a Kingdom, a Kingdom of love and mercy that will last forever. So as we look up at the night sky and gaze on the heavenly bodies, let’s keep in mind: “It is not the star that determines the child’s destiny; it is the child who directs the star. God is in charge: not the stars or the planets, not a virus, or an earthly ruler, or me. God has come to us as a child in a manger, but he is God, and he brings to us his Kingdom.

There’s one character in the story of our Lord’s birth who speaks to us in a special way this year. Pope Francis has declared this to be a Year of St. Joseph, the foster father of Jesus. Joseph is that silent figure in the Gospel who spent more time with Jesus than anyone, except for Mary. To Joseph, God entrusted his Son and Mary his mother. Joseph too received the message of an angel and was called upon to put all his trust in the Lord. He took Mary as his wife and cherished and protected her. He led the way to Bethlehem where Jesus would be born. He stood quietly over the manger, no doubt filled with awe and love as he looked on the child Jesus, who would be a son to him. Joseph teaches us to listen to the voice of God, to go wherever he leads. He teaches us to be still in the presence of God, to look quietly on the Christ child and to trust him, to trust in his love and power in our lives. Joseph, the righteous man, shows us along with Mary how to be a good and faithful disciple of Jesus.

So, once again, we hear the words of the angel: “Do not be afraid… a savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord.” As we celebrate the birth of Jesus in this strange and challenging time, our hope is undimmed and our hearts are filled again with joy, because no matter what happens, God is with us, and his name is Jesus.