

December 25, 2017 St. Augustine Cathedral

The Nativity of the Lord Mass at Midnight

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, Peace to those on whom His favor rests!”

These “glorious” words sung by a “*multitude of Angels*” conclude the Earth-shaking “*good news of great joy*” that, as we just heard in our Gospel passage, the Angel first proclaimed to the Shepherds who were *keeping the night watch over their flock*”. The two important phrases in that message are “Glory to God in the highest”----and-----“Peace to those on whom His favor rests”. Glory to God **and** Peace for all humanity!-----that is the message of Christmas----that is the Hope that we continue to hold onto that one day, that message will be fulfilled. But Christmas celebrates that Dream beginning to be realized in the Birth of the Prince of Peace!

And so, on this “O Holy Night” and at this beautiful Midnight Hour, I want to wish you that very same message that the Angels proclaimed on that first Christmas night: May we too give Glory to God in the Highest and open ourselves to allow the Peace of Christ to rest upon us.

In the name of Msgr. Osborn and all the clergy, I want to welcome all of you here at this “snowey Midnight” hour and to wish all of you a truly Blessed, Joyful and Merry Christmas!

Midnight Mass is one of the most solemn and beautiful celebrations of the year: for many of us, this is a tradition----we’ve been coming to Midnight Mass all our lives, snow or no snow; for others of you here this evening, perhaps this is a first time. But for all of us, as we are treated to the sights of this beautifully decorated Cathedral, to the sounds of the Choir and Brass proclaiming the age-old Christmas carols, and to the inspired Word of God retelling the Divine Love Story so familiar to us that we may very well be able to repeat the words right along off by heart, it’s obvious why being here in the middle of the night is such a wonderful and prayerful experience.

We heard in this very early morning’s First Reading, the Prophet Isaiah giving us the long-range announcement in his Prophecy from of Old directed to the People of Israel who, at that time, were enduring great suffering as they had been driven out of their homeland and were being held as captives in a foreign land.

And so his words, first spoken to them who were truly “*walking in darkness*”, about the coming of a “*great Light*”, brought them comfort in their suffering. The promise of a “*Child to be born---a Son to be given---Who would be called: ‘Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace*” gave them Hope to hold fast to their Faith in God.

And so, fast-forward about 700 years to the Angels making this incredible announcement during the middle of the night to a group of Shepherds keeping the “night watch” over their flock. Isaiah’s Prophecy is finally fulfilled, as the Angel proclaimed: “*For today in the City of David, a Savior has been born for you Who is Christ and Lord.*”

But, what’s really important is what the very first words were that the Angel spoke to the Shepherds: “*Do not be afraid!*” Those are the first words of the Christmas message---and those are the words that God, and God’s messengers, have consistently expressed in one form or another to us human beings.

The entire Revelation of God’s Word, from the Book of Genesis as the first Book of the Old Testament to the Book of Revelation concluding the New Testament, is a Divine Love Story----it’s about how much God loves us. He never wants us to be afraid of anything, most especially not of Him; His constant desire is for us---and for all humanity----to be One with Him----to allow His Peace to rest upon us. And the Highpoint of that Love Story is the Feast that we celebrate on this Holy Night!

And so, from Isaiah’s perspective 700 years before the Birth of Christ, here we are, gathered together for this Midnight Mass 2,017 years (give or take a few) after the Birth of Christ.

In some ways, the world IS a scary place. It always has been, and I guess it always will be. The Jewish people living in Isaiah’s time, 700 years before the Birth of Christ, had a lot to be afraid of, as we already heard; the Shepherds watching over their Flocks on the first Christmas night had wolves, thieves and marauders to be afraid of; and we’re living at a time here at the end of 2017 in some pretty frightening times of national and global chaos which can fill us with a certain foreboding and dread. And yet, if an Angel appeared to us gathered together here in this Cathedral, the message (I’m pretty sure) would be the same as it was to the Shepherds: “Do not be afraid!”.

It's not that God wasn't aware of the powerful Assyrians in Isaiah's times, or the occupying Roman forces in Jesus' times, or to the Islamic terrorists or North Korean threats in our own times; God is totally aware of all the "principalities and powers" that may be at work against Him and His ways at all times. That's what makes the Angel's announcement to the Shepherds a timeless message and Good News of Great Joy that is for ALL the people, for all times and places: "*A Savior has been born for you, Who is Christ and Lord!*" The Angel's message to the Shepherds announced to them, and to all the world----past, present and future---that the Savior Who is born for you is Christ and Lord!

Christmas celebrates the greatest Gift that God could possibly have ever given to the world----the Gift of His Son, Who was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, but Who grew in His mother's womb for 9 months---like we are; Who was born, as we were; Who had to learn to crawl---walk---talk---and grow, as we did; and Who taught us through the Good News of His Gospel how to live, as He did. God loves us so much that He came to be one with us, to save us from our own sins and the power of sin in the world. That's why God's constant message to us is: "Do not be afraid!"

Of course, we still have things to worry about in our lives. But what we don't have to worry about is that we don't have to face any of those scary things, or oppressive powers, or evil forces by ourselves.

During these days of Christmas celebrations with family and friends, we will enjoy each other's company, and perhaps we will exchange gifts with one another. Those gifts are symbolic expressions of our love for one another---our unity with each other----and sometimes they even might help to mend a quarrel.

That's what God did on Christmas----the Gift of His Son is the greatest possible expression of His Love for us; Jesus is the Reconciler, Who mends the division between ourselves and the human race that has distorted and altered the relationship with God because of Sin. Jesus has healed that division.

Jesus was born at a fixed time in history as Luke recorded for us in the Gospel, but He continues to be born anew in our hearts as people of Faith. As Pope Francis wrote so beautifully in his Exhortation of the "Joy of the Gospel": "*Those who accept Jesus' offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner-emptiness and loneliness. **With Christ, Joy is constantly born anew.***"

Christmas is the time to allow Jesus to be “born anew” within our hearts. Do we make room for Jesus to be “born anew” in our hearts this Christmas? OR, as Mary and Joseph found when they tried to find a room at the Inn, will Jesus find that there is no room for him in our hearts? When we allow Jesus to be born again and again into our hearts, we find the true Christmas Joy that God intends for us to have---and that is what dispels Fear!

Christmas celebrates God’s Gift of Love to us. And Christmas also is the occasion for us to give one another gifts to show our love for each other. But how do we show our Love for God?

The best gift we can give to God is to live our lives in union with Him----to follow the example that Jesus came to teach the world---to live with one another in Love----to work to make the world, or at least our part of the world, a better place----to right wrongs, to heal injuries, to mend quarrels, to forgive those who hurt us, to treat all people with respect, and to work for justice in all circumstances.

Today, please take some time to gaze upon the figure of the Baby Jesus lying in the Manger at this beautiful Manger scene here, or in the one you have at home. Look at the Baby, and realize Who that Baby is! That Baby is God here with us! And as you look at that figure of the Baby Jesus, don’t lose sight of the fact that the Baby Jesus is looking right back at you with unconditional love and everlasting mercy. And He will be saying to you. *“Do not be afraid!”*

May you be more convinced this Christmas than ever before that our God loves us, and the reason why we can heed His constant message to *not be afraid* with absolute conviction is because we are safe and secure in the Love, Mercy and Peace of Jesus, our Savior, Who is Christ and Lord.

May you have a Blessed and Joyful Christmas!`