“Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.”

An Angel from Heaven first spoke these words to a group of Shepherds in Bethlehem more than 2,000 years ago in the stillness of that original “Silent and Holy Night”. And then an entire Heavenly Host proclaimed that there was “good news of great joy” that would change the world forever. And this “good news” was that “a Savior has been born for you, Who is Christ and Lord.” And furthermore, they were told that this “Savior” was “an Infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger”, a feeding box for animals with which they, as Shepherds, were very familiar.

Those same words---“Do not be afraid”--- are repeated once more on this very early Christmas morning to each of us, and remind us that what we celebrate today is that same world-changing moment when God came to be with us in the Person of Jesus, our Savior. That “good news” should truly fill the hearts of each of us gathered here in this Cathedral, as well as those who are joining us virtually wherever you are, with “great joy” for the same reasons. Our Savior has been Born. He has saved us from our sins. God has come to be with us, and He remains with us always. No matter what else is going on in our lives---despite the turbulence of the world in which we live---even though COVID-19 and its variants continue to be of great concern to everyone------we are still told: “Do not be afraid”. And our response should continue to be one that allows us to proclaim with Joy: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace to those on whom God’s favor rests.”

And so, my dear sisters and brothers in Christ, on behalf of my brother priests and deacons joining me here this morning, I wish you all a very Blessed and Merry Christmas, with prayers that the time that we will spend together during these days with family and friends will be filled with good cheer and good health, and will soon result in peace and good will among all people.
This Christmas Mass at Midnight is one of the most joyful Masses of the year. After a year of seemingly endless health crises, social unrest, political divisiveness, and economic uncertainty, this Christmas Mass launches us into a time of wishes granted, dreams realized, and hope renewed. On this Christmas morning, we have heard God’s Word filled with Hope, a Vision for the future, an anticipation of a time when there will be peace on earth, and good will to all.

The Prophet Isaiah put it this way in this morning’s First Reading:

*The people who walked in darkness*
*have seen a great light;....*
*You have brought them abundant joy*
*and great rejoicing,*

-Why?----Because: *A Child is born to us, a son is given us."

Our Psalm also enthusiastically proclaimed: “*Today is born our Savior, Christ the Lord*”, because our Savior is the long-awaited Prince of Peace.

On this holy night, we feel God’s presence and the joy of Christmas in a powerful way. Christmas comes at the end of the calendar year in the darkness and cold of winter, but it always brings with it new life and light, renewed hope for the year to come, and the opportunity for healing of past wounds and troubles. With all that’s going on in our world, we need the light, healing and hope of Jesus now more than ever. But along with that, now more than ever, we who know and love Jesus as our Savior and Lord, also have to be willing to stand up for that Good News, to challenge the “ways of the world” that are working against the Good News of God’s Love.

When we talk about “Joy”, it’s important that we understand that “Joy” is not synonymous with “happiness” or “good cheer”. Joy is a spiritual Virtue---it’s actually one of the Fruits of the Holy Spirit. It’s a great Gift that God wants each of us to be filled with especially on Christmas. “Joy” results from knowing, loving and serving Jesus. We should experience Joy when we look at the Baby Jesus lying in this Manger, or in the Mangers of our own Nativity Scenes at home. We should also experience Joy because of the Love we have for the grown-up Jesus, He Who shed His Blood for our Salvation, and Who gives us His Body and Blood to be our
Spiritual Food. Jesus is God-with-us. When we unite our minds, hearts and lives with Him, He becomes the Source of our Joy.

On this “Silent and Holy Night”, and forever after, let us choose to live in joy, rather than to choose to be negative, critical, or what Pope Francis describes as “melancholy,” which he defines as the dull, gray, sad existence of people who have no hope. Think about our dear Blessed Mother Mary, who immediately after the Annunciation, when an Angel told her that God wanted her to become the Mother of His Son through a Virgin Birth made possible by the Holy Spirit, rather than sitting around being swallowed up by the “melancholy” of her own worries about what might happen to her when Joseph and others learned of her “miraculous” pregnancy, she immediately “arose and went in haste” to visit and help Elizabeth for 3 months. Mary should be our model to help us to choose not to be overcome by human worries and fears; and we can do that and choose to find Joy by doing what she did---“arising from our worries” and “going in haste” to attend to those in our lives who are in need; to find ways to bring them the Joy of Christ. May the in-spiration and en-couragement of the Holy Spirit help us to set aside our worries, our fears, and our disappointments so that our hearts can be filled with the Joy of the Spirit.

Jesus, Who is the source of our Joy, is the reason why we can hold onto Hope. He is with us through all the bad times, the natural disasters, the pandemic and all the other challenges we face in our lives.

In our Second Reading, St. Paul reminds us:

The grace of God has appeared, saving all
and training us to reject godless ways and worldly desires
and to live temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age,
as we await the blessed hope,
the appearance of the glory of our great God
and savior Jesus Christ.

The grace of God which is given to us this holy night is a free and unmerited gift. We did not earn it, and we do not deserve it. But God’s grace places us under an obligation “to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age.” It’s not too difficult for us to be very much aware of the “godless ways” we see in the world around us; we are all very strongly
influenced by the “worldly desires” in our materialistic culture. The first thing we need to do is to discern which ways are “godless” ones---which ways lead us away from God and His ways; and then secondly, we need to intentionally decide to choose those “desires” that can help us to be the people God wants us to be. That’s part of what it means to choose to live temperately and devoutly in the world where we live. It also means that we need to open our hearts, and welcome the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, which we received in a special way at our Baptism and Confirmation, so that they can mature, grow and manifest themselves in our daily lives, and to allow them to result in good actions and choices that are the Fruits of our cooperation with the Grace of the Holy Spirit. One of the ways we do that is in saying ‘no’ to selfishness and sin; and saying ‘yes’ to kindness, justice, mercy and generosity.

What all the world had been longing for throughout what we know as the Old Testament has been realized in the most unlikely way. Our long-awaited Savior has come, not in earthly power or majesty, but in the poverty and humility of a Child born in a stable surrounded by farm animals. Where we would expect something magnificent, He presents us with simplicity Incarnate. Where we would surround His birth with rich and famous celebrities, God invites the outcasts of Jewish society, poor shepherds who have the “smell of the sheep” they tend.

And with the Child, they find Mary, His Mother, and Joseph His earthly Father, the first Holy Family. On this Christmas, as we join with our Families, we too are blessed. None of us is perfect; all of us have problems and challenges. But when we live together in Love, and try to help one another to be the people God wants each of us to be---when we remain faithful to each other and provide that sense of stability and security----when we help each other to make good choices, and to live according to God’s ways, while avoiding the “godless ways” and “worldly desires” that lead us astray----when we do that, our Families too are Holy. Let us ask our Blessed Mother and St. Joseph to help us endure hardship with as much trust and courage as they did, to be patient and kind to each other, to pray more, and to share more generously with those in need all the gifts we will receive this Christmas.

We are so blessed when we realize that God has chosen not to be removed from us, but rather that He has taken the initiative and come to be with us in
Jesus. Our God is with us—Emmanuel—closer to us than we are to ourselves. He is in our hearts, our minds, and once we receive Holy Communion, He will be within our very bodies. We don’t need to search for Him; He has searched for us. He has found us and He loves us unconditionally. He comes to us now through the grace of the Holy Spirit, and, when we open ourselves willingly, He will remain with us, no matter what happens to us in these troubled times in which we are living.

The coming of Jesus our Lord on this holy night turns everything inside out. Where there is darkness in our world, He brings light. When we are tempted to despair, the newborn Savior inspires us with Holy Hope. Where there is injustice, social unrest, violence and inequality, our Lord urges us to work for justice, harmony, and to love one another as He loves us. If we can embrace His teaching, and follow His example, we will experience Healing, Hope, and Great Love in our hearts, in our families and parish communities, and in our society. All of that is why we should celebrate Christmas, the Feast of Jesus’ Birth, with such incomparable Joy!

I wish each of you in this Cathedral, all who are with us through live-streaming, and everyone in all our parishes and neighborhoods throughout southwest Michigan, and throughout the world, a joy-filled Christmas season.

And so on this Christmas Day, let us take heart, and “Be not afraid” because God is with us, and He will never abandon us. “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, Peace to those on whom His favor rests.”

May the Joy of Christmas fill your hearts this day, and throughout the New Year to come! Merry Christmas!