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Homily for the Feast of the Nativity

St. Sabina Parish*

Belton, Missouri

Christmas Eve Mass - December 24, 2006*

The traditional or scriptural story of Christmas is well-known to most of us. It features God's angelic messenger, Gabriel, seeking assent from a young woman in Nazareth that she was indeed willing to mother a child with a divine paternity and whose name, Jesus, had been pre-selected, something which parents often do. Mary gave her consent, not without some soul searching, and eventually her husband, a good man, having successfully overcome his uneasiness about the origin of his bride's pregnancy, goes about the domestic task of establishing a family. People do this all the time.

Now the government gets into the act. Joseph, along with many others, had to honor an edict from Rome requiring him to report to his ancestral home to be numbered as part of the Emperor's census. Mary did not have to go but she also undertook the tiresome journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem because she loved Joseph and because she needed the strength of his unwavering affirmation now that her child was almost due.

Homelessness became a sudden reality when they looked for shelter in Bethlehem. Maybe the shaking heads were influenced by her obvious condition but we really don't know. Somebody offered a stable and here Jesus was born and the young mother doing the best she could, wrapped him in swaddling clothes. Here, he received his first visitors, some local shepherd coming in out of the night drawn by an unexplainable impulse that something extraordinary was happening and deeply aware that this child was no ordinary child.

Such is the kernel of a divine love story which resonates with our everyday human dreams and experiences. Who among us does not long for love, fidelity to one another, creative growth, happiness and peace, the hope embodied in all new life, hearts in synchronization with the pulse of God?

Luke and Matthew combine to give their insights into the Christmas story and the Church in the Second Preface for Advent summarizes it all in a few short lines.

“His future coming was proclaimed by all the prophes.
The virgin mother bore him in her womb with love beyond all telling.
John the Baptist was his herald and made him known when at last he came.”

As mysterious as it is, we are assured that the prophets and Mary and John, the Lord's cousin, were convinced that their Jesus was the promised one, the Messiah, our God sharing our flesh which is another way of saying INCARNATE, our God making sacred the humanity which is our common lot. Jesus did this to identify himself with us at our level. If we think of our God as unreachable, unapproachable, unknowable, judgmental, uncaring and distantly aloof then we

do not understand the meaning of or the reason for Christmas and that, I would say, is a real sadness.

Now, during these days, as another year enters its final week, there is a great temptation for preachers and TV commentators and newspaper editorial writers to decry the multiple evils of our society and to bemoan the fact that we seem to have smothered the spirit of Christmas. That may be true, at least partially, but I am going to resist that temptation.

Instead I am going to suggest one simple question for your serious consideration this week.

What does the coming of Christ mean to you personally -- not your parents, not your spouse, not your kids -- you personally?

It's been my experience that we go to great lengths to avoid answering that question and the easiest way (or should I say, the least guilty way) of doing this is to absorb ourselves to the point of exhaustion in the trappings of Christmas time. We often quietly but persistently push our consciences into the background by persuading ourselves that whatever we're doing we're doing it for others. Right? Unfortunately, we can be dead wrong! It all boils down to a matter of faith. Do you believe? Or don't you? Do you want to believe? Or don't you? If you cannot answer at least one of these four questions in the affirmative, then you are surely wasting your time coming to this Mass.

But you are here. Like all of us you are searching for the real God - the God whose love and compassion and goodness and contentment you want to reflect and to emulate in your life. He is there in the crib, no less God because he is an infant, reaching for you personally as he reached in his childish helplessness for the touch and the warmth of Mary's and Joseph's attention.

I cannot know the ups and downs of your daily life as another Christmas lessens the number of years of our allotted span. I cannot see the wounds and scars which dull your soul. I cannot feel the aches and pains which haunt your past and hound your present.

But I can tell you that the Infant of Bethlehem is a miracle-worker and I believe in miracles. God's love is like a whirlpool of joy. It gradually sweeps us into his presence but, in faith, he waits for us to make the first step, to come to the brink, to edge closer, to open our hearts to his will, to live in his presence. He even waited for Mary to respond to his invitation. He may be waiting for you.

Over 20 years ago, I received a Christmas card which depicted a reproduction of a prayer written in 1513 by one Fra Giovanni, a Brother John, about whose life, despite some research, I know practically nothing. Like St. Joseph, he probably lived a somewhat "hidden life" as indeed most of us are called to do. His prayer, however, to my mind, captures the promise of Christmas and, in closing, I share it with you:

“There is nothing I can give you which you have not: but there is much that while I cannot give, you can take. No heaven can come to us unless our hearts find rest in it today. TAKE HEAVEN.

No peace lies in the future which is not hidden in the present instant. TAKE PEACE.

The gloom of the world is but a shadow; behind it, yet within reach,
is joy. TAKE JOY.

And so, at this Christmas time, I greet you with the prayer that for
you, now and forever, the day breaks and the shadows flee away.”

* Bishop Boland first offered this homily some decades ago at a church in the Archdiocese of Washington, DC. This timeless message of the true gift of Christmas was retold at St. Sabina Parish in the Diocese of Kansas City ~ St. Joseph on Christmas Eve, 2006.