

Christmas
(Dec. 25, 2009)

A Christmas Story

I would like to tell you a Christmas story. Now the wonderful thing about this story is that it is true. It really happened.

A number of years ago when I was pastor of St. Ignatius Church in Baltimore I visited a parishioner who was a patient in Johns Hopkins Hospital. As I left his room a nurse approached me and said, "Father, there is a woman here who is not a Catholic but I think she would appreciate a visit." So I went to see her. She was elderly, about to have surgery on her eyes to prevent her from losing her eyesight. It was a few days before Christmas and Christmas music was playing in the corridors. During a lull in the conversation we could hear "Silent Night" drifting through the open doorway. She asked me, "Was it dark that night in Bethlehem? And was Mary afraid?" I did my best to answer her and reassure her of God's love and care. We prayed together. I gave her a blessing and left.

A few days after Christmas I returned to see my parishioner and decided to drop in on the woman. Her surgery had taken place two days before. Well, this is a Christmas story so it has a happy ending. The operation was successful. She would not lose her eyesight. She said to me, "What a wonderful gift for Christmas!"

I can't help but feel that this incident from my own experience is a beautiful illustration of what we celebrate tonight (today). The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light, just as this woman who walked in darkness was given back her sight. And the marvelous thing is: she recognized it as a gift from God.

And isn't that exactly what we celebrate? A gift from God – indeed the greatest gift God could give us all, the gift of his own Son – given to each and every one of us individually and to all of us together as God's family. We heard it in the Gospel story: St. Luke's beautiful narrative of the birth of Jesus.

How often have we heard that story read? How often have we pondered its meaning? And yet has any one of us managed to penetrate the

depths of what St. Luke is trying to tell us? Later generations would say it this way:

The second person of the Holy Trinity, God of God, light of light, true God of true God, is born of a woman and becomes a baby, a baby, really human and thoroughly divine. When we assent to the astounding claim that the Word becomes flesh, one of us and at the same time, remains one with God, we are catapulted into deep and mysterious waters.

The Fathers of the church, those thoughtful people who wrote in the first years of Christianity, would put it this way: God became human so that humanity could become divine – a bold statement and yet marvelously true.

In words that are deceptively simple yet wondrously fanciful, St. Luke tells us how it happened. It was a time when the whole world was at peace, and, according to Luke, the emperor decreed a census of the entire inhabited world – so the evangelist places this event in the context of a universal phenomenon. In ways that it does not realize, the whole world is involved in this extraordinary happening.

In the first two chapters of his Gospel Luke shows us heaven and earth in dialogue. An angel speaks to Zechariah. An angel speaks to Mary. An angel speaks to shepherds. When the angel spoke to Zechariah and Mary it was a promise. But when the angel speaks to the shepherds it is no longer a promise. It is the proclamation of its fulfillment. It has happened.

Now Luke is making a point when he tells us that the first people to hear about Jesus' birth are shepherds. Shepherds were poor people. They lived in the open in pastures with their flocks. They were dirty and their work kept them from going to the synagogue on the Sabbath. So the religious leaders looked down on them. But God had a special love for them. Already at the very moment of his birth Jesus is preaching good news to the poor – and he will continue to do it throughout his life.

The angel tells the shepherds: do not be afraid for God's presence is not taking the form of something terrible, awesome, and fear-inspiring, but of something small, vulnerable, and entirely human. "You will find a baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger."

Then Luke fills the midnight sky with a huge crowd of angels, singing "Glory to God." But when the shepherds come to the stable they find no

grandiose or spectacular scene, but just what the angel had said: a baby nursing at his Mother's breast. And you know, there is a wonderful lesson there for all of us. When God comes into our lives, God comes more often in simple, ordinary things – things that perhaps we take for granted. But if we could just realize that even in these simple, ordinary things God is present, then maybe, just maybe we would hear angels singing, too.

Well, as we exchange gifts, let's not forget what we celebrate tonight (today) is God's gift. When we give a gift we say to someone else: I esteem you. You are my friend. I want something of me to belong to you because I love you.

That is what God said to us the night Jesus was born. That is what God says to us tonight. And that is what God says to us each and every day of our lives.

May God bless you all and grant you all a very holy and happy Christmas!