

## **The Nativity of Our Lord (Christmas Day) – Year B – December 25, 2011**

**Isaiah 62:6-12; Psalm 97; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:1-20**

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Many of us arrive at Christmas Day as thoroughly weary, exhausted, and stressed, as Mary and Joseph must have felt after their long journey to Bethlehem and parenthood. As much as we try to stay calm, and walk attentively through Advent, many of us are wondering once again whether it's all worth it. That is, all the rushing around to buy Christmas gifts, digging out the Christmas decorations, and putting up the tree. Somehow finding time to write Christmas cards or letters, to prepare our homes to welcome guests. Not to mention the whirlwind of baking and cooking, parties and entertaining. There's also more than a few of us, who are emotionally fatigued as well as physically drained, pondering in our hearts our loneliness, and memories of loved ones. Lurking behind the tinsel and the jolly music, there's economic realities too real to ignore. Cultural pressures send us zooming into overdrive, flying almost helplessly along a road that can easily end painfully in the stress of overwhelming debt.

Behind the fuzzy, over-sentimental smiles of plaster figurines in carefully arranged nativity scenes, lies a more profound truth. Behind the statues of a glowing Mary, a proud Joseph, and awestruck shepherds, there's a live wire, filled with the tension of fear, and amped up with hope. There's the real story of political and religious oppression, and financial hardship in an unjust world. There's also the hope and expectation of new life. There's the promise of good news and great joy. There's the awe-inspiring heavenly sign of angels appearing to incredibly ordinary shepherds, living below the poverty line with no education. There's a perfectly ordinary birth, a child wrapped in bands of cloth, and lying in a manger. In the regal halls of power, no one knows that the birth of Jesus, a Jewish peasant, has even occurred. Not one of society's movers and shakers know that His coming into the world presages an extraordinary divine intervention. They've no idea that Jesus is God's Son, the Messiah and Lord of all, and they care even less. That is until He grows up to challenge their greedy lives, and threatens their power and status. As a point of fact, this vulnerable baby boy does grow up to be the real Savior and redeemer of the world, not some worldly king or emperor, claiming to be a god and savior under false pretenses.

As Mary and Joseph huddle for warmth on their first day as new parents, surely they're surprised to see a bunch of filthy and excited shepherds looking for their child. The text tells us that all who heard the shepherds' revelations were amazed. As Mary ponders all these things in her heart, does she, like many new parents feel the mix of joy and relief, and a whispering uneasiness. What is this lingering burden of an expanse of days lying in wait like a hungry beast?

Our own day has been filled with new gifts: clothes, gadgets, toys and treasures. The mysterious, pregnant packages waiting patiently for us have yielded an abundance of delights, and maybe a fleeting disappointment here or there. Worldly gifts tend to be like that. The packages that come our way every day are sometimes bursting with joyful surprises. Then there are the not-so-welcome gifts of days that come knocking on our door with a load of sorrow or pain. Is it all worth it? How can we find the things that really matter like meaningful relationships, forgiveness and healing? How can we re-vision our future with hopeful hearts, and joyful longing? How has the Lord been calling us to prepare for His Son? How come it feels like we've barely had time to catch our breath? Who can bring us peace? How can we know what real love and peace, joy and healing mean? What is this glorious good news brought to us in the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, the One heralded as our Savior, Messiah, and Lord?

Take a breath now and try to relax. Let's reflect on the good news that Luke shares with us. Let's explore the story anew, see it with new eyes and hearts, like the children that we are in God's sight. Mary and Joseph go to the City of David to be registered, no doubt for a poll tax. The peace of Rome comes with a high price, the oppressor's hand delving into our pockets. As the prophet, Micah says of Bethlehem "from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days." Quite fittingly, our gracious Lord, who is the "bread of life" (John 6:35) is born in Bethlehem, which

literally means, “the house of bread”. As Luke describes the scene, Jesus is laid in a food trough. We’re meant to notice the manger; it’s mentioned three times in this short reading from Luke’s gospel. When we pray in the words that Jesus taught us, “give us this day our daily bread”, we’re acknowledging our dependence on God alone to feed us, nourish us and strengthen us. We’re asking as God’s beloved children for our aching hunger to be filled by the same bread of life who is at once our Lord and a powerless infant. He is the One who was before all time, and who longs to spend eternity with each of us. God has given the whole world, once for all, the only gift that can ever truly satisfy the desires of our hearts, the gift of everlasting life in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

“Do not be afraid,” says the angel of the Lord to the shepherds. As the first letter of John reminds us (1 John 4:18) “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear”. Other than the shocking and sudden appearance of the angel and the heavenly host, the shepherds have nothing to fear in this world, because they have nothing to lose. They have no property to protect. Being firmly entrenched at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder without any chance of becoming upwardly mobile, there’s no need to worry about making a good impression. They don’t have nightmares about recessions, or dwindling 401k accounts to keep them up at night. No car payments, and no mortgages. If any of these things make us fearful or give us sleepless nights, then perhaps it’s time to simplify our own lives, so that we too can fearlessly focus on God in Christ Jesus. Our faith in Jesus is a life-giving gift that no thief can steal, and a gift that just keeps on giving. As the apostle Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans, there’s nothing in heaven or on earth, or in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. When we make room for Christ at the center of our own hearts, we discover even more gifts, the gifts of freedom and new life in Him. Our faith in Christ blesses us with freedom from fear. In the forgiveness of our sins, we find new life and hope. We also find release from the stuff that binds us to the world, and to fearful lives. Perhaps best of all we find ourselves freely giving with deep gratitude for all that God has done for us in the greatest gift of Jesus, our Lord.

Good news is for sharing! The shepherds don’t hesitate to follow the angels’ directions to God’s gracious sign. God’s Christmas gift isn’t the kind of gift to be toyed with for a little while and set aside. The Lord desires that we make Him welcome in the manger of our hearts, so that He can build a mansion of God’s grace and love, peace and joy throughout all the days of our lives. Today and every day is a good day to receive the gift of new life, to share the good news of Jesus Christ in what we say, and in deeds of love and compassion. Today is a perfect day to follow Jesus’ humble ways, into a future filled with hope and everlasting life. Today is a great day to praise God for all that we’ve heard and seen, for all that God has revealed to us.

Merry Christmas!

Amen.