

CHRISTMAS EVE 2011

Isaiah 9:2-11

Luke 2: 1-20

LET US PRAY

*O holy Womb of God, birth each of us into your image and likeness
That Christ may again reveal your love and concern for our world.*

*We pray especially for all who are most vulnerable
that they may experience your Wisdom and Compassion.*

Grant this in the name of Jesus.

Amen.

It's no coincidence that Luke is the only gospel writer who tells the "Christmas Story" of angels in the night, suddenly appearing to shepherds in the field while keeping watch over their flocks. The shepherds are the first to hear the good news of great joy for **all** humanity. Luke wants us to know, right from the moment Jesus is born, that God's grace first came to those who didn't expect it - and certainly not in the fields where they were working on that particular night. They were the sort of people no one paid much attention to. They were dirty and smelly. Religious folk of the time put their nose up when it came to shepherds. They were dirty and smelly and fortunately rarely if ever darkened the doors of the synagogue! They lived outside the boundaries of polite society and would hardly be considered trustworthy sources for any news let alone the message of the angels they hear this holy night. But they were the first ones God noticed. They were the ones to whom God's messengers revealed the wondrous mystery of this holy night. And they remind us this Christmas that God pays attention to those who seem to go unnoticed, because God's grace is without limit or condition and often comes to us through little ones. Perhaps this is why Jesus often said that unless we become like children, we won't enter the kingdom of God.

There was a story in England this past year, perhaps you heard it, of a six year old girl who had just lost one of her baby teeth. She put it under her pillow as perhaps many of us did when we were children. As one might suspect, the tooth fairy came in the night and surprised her with a coin. This story would not have been all that significant in and of itself were it not for the fact that the little girl had just heard the prime minister, David Cameron, speak on TV about the recession and its affect on so many people struggling to make ends meet. Realizing the seriousness of the nation's economic crisis, the little girl decided to write a letter to the prime minister and send him the money she received from the tooth fairy. She requested that he use it "to make the country better and pay for jobs." The coin was a pound, worth about \$1.50 in our country.

The story touched the hearts of the people in the United Kingdom. A young girl shares the joy of an unexpected gift she found under her pillow with those she felt needed it more than she did. Her act of generosity was worth far more than a dollar and a half! It had the power to inspire and even transform the hearts of many, including the prime minister. He was reported to have said that if all the people sent their tooth fairy money, Britain would soon be on the road to recovery! A hyperbole, for sure, but nonetheless an affirmation of the sort of miracles which take place when people put the common good before their own personal agenda and self-satisfaction. What struck me about this

story is that this young child believed in herself and in her ability to help make life better for those in need.

God is with us, not just on this holy night, but at all times and especially in humble and unexpected places we don't often pay much attention to, including the darkness we all experience on our human journey. In fact, if we haven't known darkness, we can't fully appreciate the light. And we need look no further than our own lives to see how true this is. Perhaps our health isn't good or the health of those we love and care for. Perhaps we wait for test results over the holidays. Or our finances are not where they should be. Perhaps some of our relationships are difficult and in need of repair, or we find ourselves grieving the loss of loved ones this Christmas. Or our job is not secure or we presently find ourselves unemployed. Can we perceive the light of God's presence in the midst of the darkness? Do we notice, for instance, the little miracles in the world around us? It's often hard to see in the darkness how a word of encouragement or a simple deed done with genuine care and compassion, can be, and often is, a catalyst in helping someone turn some corners, moving possibly from sadness to joy, or from despair to hope. The darkness of unfortunate situations can be the occasion for opening our minds to fresh perspectives, new insights, perhaps even leading to decisions to move in unplanned directions, on paths we would otherwise not have taken were it not for the light we've seen in the darkness.

We gather together this holy night to hear once again a story we have heard since our childhood. The news of great joy for **all** God's people is a message of hope for a world in need of repair and transformation. It's a message for hearts in need of healing. It's a message for families in need of reconciliation. It's a message for people in relationships which need mending and souls heavily laden in need of rest and new life. The "Word became flesh and lives among us" – and we who belong to the body of Christ share in the grace of this mystery. The most insignificant of moments can awaken us to the wonder and mystery of the Word become flesh – and move us through the power of God's Spirit into places not of our own choosing where Christ is present: like in our service to others, in our defense of human rights, in our welcoming of immigrants, in our commitment to seek forgiveness and reconciliation and in the fostering of unity among people of all faith traditions and those who have none.

For those who have eyes to see and hearts open to receive anew the gift of God's grace, the miracle of Christmas is that every person – **every person**, by virtue of our blessed humanity, shares in the grace of the Incarnation. We just need to pay attention.

So listen carefully!
Live each day with a generous spirit.
Act authentically with integrity, courage and conviction.
Let go of suspicion and replace it with trust.
Find the time.
Seek out a forgotten friend.
Be gentle.
Laugh a little.
Laugh a lot!
Encourage *children*.
Encourage children!
Be open to the mystery!

For God continually surprises us by showing up in the most unlikely of places – in the little ones who seem to go unnoticed - and often have no clue themselves, that they are for us the bearers of divine light, bringing hope and peace to our world.

Merry Christmas in the Name of God!
The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.