

Homily: Mystery of Christ

Nothing is too wonderful for God.

Christmas is mysterious. The mystery is the nature of God, found in the marriage of two images: Jesus as a baby in a manger and Jesus as the Holy One of heaven, descended to earth.

Jesus is Immanuel “God with us” – Jesus is human, fully aware of the human condition; our weaknesses and failures. Jesus sits at the right hand of God Almighty, able to intercede for us with full knowledge of our weaknesses and temptations.

Jesus is the Messiah “Anointed by God” – Jesus is our deliverer, who comes in glory with power and authority to save us from darkness. Jesus did not come as a military leader at the head of legions of angels to make the world submit. Strangely, and mysterious, Jesus came as a sign of God’s love – warm, persistent, filling us with hope.

The Mystery: Jesus is wholly human and wholly divine, a gift from God to free us from spiritual darkness and oppression to live in a kingdom established by God, living with truth and justice for all.

The news is full of challenging stories these days: young African-American men killed by police, assassinations and protests, young immigrant children separated from their parents and subject to predators, the brutal and oppressive regimes of ISIS and North Korea, human trafficking, the continued spread of Ebola in Sierra Leone. In our own neighborhood and homes, there are people suffering from poverty, neglected children, violence, abuse, disease and failing bodies. Loved ones have died. The world is a place filled with darkness and shadow.

Isaiah’s message, written 700 years before the birth of Christ, deepens the mystery.

People walking/dwelling in darkness – see a great light, light shined on them – the light is a spiritual awakening we have when we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior, surrendering to God’s love. God gave Isaiah a great prophecy: a new day will dawn when we will be delivered from our lives of darkness by a Messiah sent by God to save us.

God multiplies the nation – every day. **God increases our joy**

Two images of joy in Isaiah:

Joy of harvest – the satisfaction and joy when we receive the rewards for our hard work, patience and care. God’s grace and love fill us with contentment when we serve by faith.

Joy of receiving ill-gotten gain – there’s a thrill when we receive something we did not earn. When we know God’s love, regardless of our circumstance and situation, it is like stealing because we feel unworthy, like we have gotten away with something. I have good news: you are worthy of God’s love; accept the gift regardless of your debt or how you feel.

Source of oppression broken as in day of Moses when the Israelite slaves were freed after 400 years of bondage in Egypt.

Three ways we are freed:

A burden – something we carry around in our heart or mind. Let go of whatever is holding you back. Give it to God and ask forgiveness, knowing you will be given God’s mercy.

Weight of hard labor – maybe your work is challenging, perhaps you have a difficult home life or someone you care for needs all of your energy and strength. Lean on God and you will be filled with grace and strength, the strength to continue, the knowledge all trials end and a peace to guide and protect you.

Rod of oppression - means of oppression are destroyed, even though they seem challenging, oppression and injustice cannot defeat a spirit freed from darkness by the love of God

Three things are accomplished in Christ on this day:

Holy Child is born: Given great names - Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace

Holy Child has divine authority

Authority grows and rules over house of David – all who follow Christ by faith

Holy Child establishes a divine, eternal kingdom, a kingdom not of this earth, for it is ruled with justice and righteousness

Zeal of Lord of hosts does this. It is the work of the Trinity, our mysterious God who is three persons in one and one in three - Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. The birth of Christ shows signs of God’s love in the work of the Spirit, the magnificence of God in the heavens and the glory of God the Son revealed in the birth of Christ.

This is a holy night and all who gathered are filled with God’s Spirit, the Spirit of hope and love. May God’s Spirit lift you up and carry you not just this night, when we are on the mountain top, but each and every day as you walk through the valleys of life. The mystery and love of God be with you all.

Let us pray:

“O Holy Child of Bethlehem, you are the hope for our hurting and broken world. We thank you, O God, for guiding us through this season of Advent, shining your light in the midst of our darkness. As your birth lit up the Bethlehem sky, continue to shine in our world by dispelling darkness, binding up the broken, and calling forth the faithful. On this holiest of nights, make us willing to welcome you as our Savior and Lord. We pray this in the name of our newborn king. Amen.”¹

¹ Bernadette Farrell, “Christ, Be Our Light!” Hope Publishing Co., 2013

Isaiah 9:2-7 (NRSV)

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness - on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Luke 2:1-20 (NRSV)

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.