

December 25, 2018    Midnight    St. Augustine Cathedral

### **Christmas Mass at Midnight**

On this most holy of all nights, on behalf of all the priests and deacons here at the Cathedral, I want to wish each of you, and all your families, a most Blessed, Merry and Joyful Christmas!

The song of the Angels, that we sang so gloriously together at the beginning of Mass this morning, and that we just heard repeated at the end of the Gospel reading a few minutes ago, captures the essence of the Good News of Christmas: the life-changing, historic, unrepeatable moment of Jesus' Birth brought "*Glory to God in the Highest, and Peace to all on earth on whom God's favor rests!*"

St. Luke was making every effort to situate the Birth of Jesus into its proper historical context, and so he identifies Caesar Augustus as the Roman Emperor who decreed that a Census was to be taken of all those in the Roman Empire, Quirinius as the governor of Syria, and that Joseph and Mary, who lived in Nazareth in Galilee therefore had to travel the great distance by foot to the little, out-of-the-way place known as Bethlehem, the City of David, not far from Jerusalem, because Joseph was of the house and family of David. Luke tells us that "*the time came for Mary to have her child, and she gave birth....she wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.*"

But St. Luke's main focus seems to be on the announcement of this major event to the lowly Shepherds, out in the fields at that very late hour, keeping watch over their flocks of sheep. That's when the Angel broke thru the midnight skies with a glorious Light, and because they were so afraid, tried to reassure them by saying: "*Do not be afraid!*", and then went on to proclaim to them this Good News of great joy: that a Savior has been born for them Who is Christ and Lord." And then an entire Heavenly Chorus joined the Angel and sang that first Gloria. As we know, the Shepherds "*went in haste*" to see this new-born Savior; and after seeing Jesus, they went back to their flocks "*glorifying and praising God*".

But other than that, no one else paid much attention. The rest of the world slept through it; the vast majority of people went on with their lives just the same as they had been living before. Only the Shepherds knew the glorious good news, and of course Mary and Joseph as well. And yet, whether anyone realized it or not, the world had been changed forever. Because of Christmas, God is now One with us in the most incredible way possible.

The very Word of God became Flesh and began making His dwelling among us. It's for that reason that in just a few moments, when we profess our Creed and get to those very words that we recite every week---"For us and for our salvation, He came down from Heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary and became man"----we are asked to genuflect on this holy night acknowledging the incredibly wonderful meaning of those words.

We might wonder why the Angelic Chorus didn't light up the sky over the whole Town of Bethlehem to proclaim the Joyous message----or over the much larger Jerusalem, the center of Jewish Faith----or, why didn't they light up the skies over the entire world to shout that message to everyone?

Part of the reason is that no one would have imagined that the satisfaction of their hearts' longing, and the fulfillment of all their hopes and dreams, could have come to them in the birth of a Baby in the little, dinky Bethlehem; and even if they could believe that, how absurd that the Baby would be born in a stable, and laid in a manger. They were longing for the Messiah, Who,

they had decided long ago, would come as a victorious warrior to destroy their enemies! They were hoping for One Who would come to save them from the oppression of the Romans. They were dreaming for the day when they could be on top, instead of always at the bottom.

That's exactly Who God sent to them, but they couldn't recognize Him because that was not at all what they had expected.

God is always full of surprises! Pope Francis recently put it this way: "celebrating Christmas means welcoming on earth the surprises of Heaven. It means helping the needy, as Jesus came down to help us in our neediness; it means trusting in God, as Mary did, even if we don't understand His plans; it means rising up, as Joseph did, to accomplish God's will, even if it doesn't make sense to us."

One of the important Christmas lessons for us to learn is that God does not fit into our limited understanding, and God does not do what we expect Him to do. But God wants us to understand Him, and God longs for us to come to know Him. That is why He sent His only-begotten Son to become One of us; to be One with us. He came so that we can get to know Him; so that we can adjust our expectations to what God expects; and so that we can change our minds and hearts so that we can be united with God and live in God's ways.

That's why God started by sharing the Good News with the Shepherds----simple and lowly ones, not absorbed with their own self-importance. They the ones who first received the Good News. And they were the ones who were sent to "go and see" for themselves. When they did, St. Luke tells us, they saw and understood; they went back to their work, but they were changed forever, as they glorified and praised God.

As we fast-forward 2000+ years, we find ourselves gathered here in joyful celebration of the Birth of Jesus. Perhaps as it was that first Christmas, the rest of the world is largely unaware, or perhaps chooses not to pay attention, while their focus is on the secular side of the Christmas holiday. We hope, and pray, that our focus is on the awareness of the life-changing and historic Event of the Birth of Christ, Who continues to be "God with us". It was His Birth, His Life, His Ministry of teaching and healing, and His suffering, death and resurrection which reconciled the world to God, and brought the gift of salvation to those who choose to embrace it--- it was that which makes the difference for those of us who live our lives as His faithful followers.

As we all know, we are living in some very challenging times. The tensions around the world, the fractures within our own society, the cultural trends which see little to no room for God and God's ways, and the scandals within our own Church----these, and more, are ample pressures to turn some people away from God and from the ways of faith in their lives. But, it was for this very reason that Jesus came into the world, and why He remains with us through His Church. God sent His Son into the world with all its problems to be the "Bridge" between us humans and the Divine.

Just like the Shepherds, we are the ones who hear these "tidings of great joy", and are sent to share that Joy with others. Today might be a good time, as we think about our lives and our relationships, to ask ourselves: are we more of a source of Joy to others, or do we more often cause others hurt or grief? Do we bring peace on earth, or do we cause division? Do we inclined to do acts of charity and kindness, or are we focused more on ourselves? Before we can share the Love of Jesus with others, we must first be in Love with Jesus ourselves. Before we can urge others to turn away from hateful or harmful acts, we must actively allow Jesus to change our hearts, and forgive our own sins. In other words, we can not go forth to proclaim the Good News of Jesus' Love until we are true disciples of Jesus ourselves.

That doesn't happen overnight; actually, it takes a lifetime of day-in and day-out conversion; it takes praying for God's grace daily, it takes trying to do what's right, perhaps failing once or twice, asking God's mercy each time, and then doing it all over again.

Or as St. Paul reminded us in today's Second Reading: *"The grace of God has appeared, saving all, and training us to reject godless ways and worldly desires, and to live temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age, as we await the blessed hope."*

That is our daily challenge. And we can be up to that challenge if we truly understand the meaning of Christmas! Jesus has come to save us. And our daily efforts are strengthened by the graces of our Loving Savior Who remains with us always. Now, it is not the Angels who proclaim the "glad tidings of great joy" to the world; it's those of us who are the Joyful Disciples of Jesus who will be the credible witnesses by proclaiming this Good News to those who have not yet heard it.

When they see us living our Faith, even in the midst of the challenges and problems of our world, our Church, as well as those "crosses" we experience in our own lives, then we not only proclaim, but live, the Good News of great joy to all the world. That is what makes this such a sacred and holy night; that is what makes Christmas a lived reality every day, of every year, for all time.

May you have a Joyful Christmas and a New Year filled with many blessings for you, your family, our Church and all the world.

God bless you, now and always!