

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light...For a child is born to us, a son is given us.”

*Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo
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“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light...For a child is born to us, a son is given us.” Every year we listen again to these words of the prophet Isaiah at this Midnight Mass of Christmas, and every year these words take on new meaning. They lead us once again to the amazement and joy of celebrating Christ’s birth and experiencing his mercy.

One could say that this entire celebration of Christmas is a celebration of mercy. From all eternity, God has looked on us with mercy and planned this very moment. Before time began, God knew he would create us. And he also knew that we would need him to save us from ourselves, from our sin and the sentence of death that goes with it. Almost since the beginning of our history, we had walked in darkness and in sin. So, he sent us his only Son, the One who would take on our human nature and become like us in all things but sin. He sent his beloved, only-begotten Son to bestow on us the mercy that he wishes to give us. As Pope Francis says, “Jesus Christ is the face of the Father’s mercy.” So, when we look upon Jesus, we see the mercy of God, mercy incarnate.

And isn’t it remarkable how he chose to come? He wasn’t born into a royal family as a mighty emperor, like Augustus whom Luke mentions at the beginning of his Gospel. His parents were humble folks from Nazareth, a carpenter and his young wife, little in the eyes of the world. And he wasn’t born in a palace, surrounded by servants. No, Jesus was born in a stable, surrounded by farm animals and visited by rough shepherds, because Joseph could find nowhere else for them to go. And Jesus didn’t come on the scene and immediately begin to wield power and issue commands. He came as a helpless child who could only cry in the night, and who grew slowly into manhood.

But this is the paradox of God’s plan. He comes to us in the most humble guise, but wielding the greatest power in the universe: the power of love and mercy. He came not to destroy and condemn, but to heal and to give the gift of life. And he does give light to those in darkness. When we are stunned again and again by the darkness of violence and hatred in our world, he brings a simple message of love for all. When our vision is darkened by secularism and materialism, he opens our eyes to the presence of God and the wisdom of simplicity. And when we feel hopeless because we fall again and again into the same old sins, he gives us hope and reassurance that God will be merciful and forgive us again and again.

One of the customs of this special season is to exchange Christmas gifts. It is said that this harkens back to the gifts brought by the Magi to the infant Jesus. But let us not forget to present our gifts to Jesus too! No, I’m not talking about gifts that we buy in a store, but the gifts of our hearts. Let us give him the gift of our lives, and in a special way, let us give him gifts of mercy. From the moment that God first conceived of us and breathed life into our souls, we have received the gift of his mercy, the undeserved, unfathomable mercy of God, who loves us more than we can ever imagine. So perhaps in return, especially in this year of mercy, we should make a deliberate intention to return that gift.

Of course, God doesn't need our mercy, but our brothers and sisters do. How many there are who have so little, who are alone, who need only a sign that someone cares. To them we can show mercy as our gift to Jesus, a return for the mercy we have received. Pope Francis reminds us of the works of mercy: to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to welcome the stranger, to visit the sick, to comfort the afflicted, to forgive offenses, to pray for the living and the dead, and all the rest. Mercy can take a thousand different forms, and every work of mercy we perform can be a gift to Jesus, a humble offering that we place before the crib of Bethlehem.

Just as the tiny, newborn infant of Bethlehem was able to bring light into darkness, so too even the smallest and most hidden work of kindness, compassion, and mercy can illuminate the darkness of our neighbor. And when many of us offer these gifts of mercy, the light of Bethlehem grows even brighter. It may seem at times like the darkness is gaining the upper hand and the light is growing faint or even is being overcome. But at Christmas, we discover that this isn't true at all. From that darkened stable in Bethlehem, the grace of God has appeared as Paul tells us, and the light of our salvation burns as brightly as ever. With the voice of Isaiah ringing out from across the centuries, we can declare once again that "a child is born to us, a son is given us; upon his shoulder dominion rests." We name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace. And just as they told the shepherds so long ago, the angels tell us good news of great joy once again: "Do not be afraid...for today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord...Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." With such news and surrounded with such glory, how can our hearts not be filled with light and joy?

In his mercy, God comes to us as a little child, little but mighty in love. He came to us in the dark of night, but he brings light to all who will receive him. He seems helpless and insignificant, but he has forever changed the world. He is Christ the Lord, the mercy of God given to you and to me.