

## **Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests**

*Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo*

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*Christmas  
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“And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

In recent months, a restoration project has been going on in Bethlehem at the Church of the Nativity, the place of Jesus’ birth. It’s an ancient church, and it has been damaged and rebuilt many, many times over the centuries. During that restoration, a magnificent ancient mosaic of an angel was discovered. It had been covered over and forgotten for years, maybe centuries. But there it was, in golden tones, with a shining face and an expression of amazement, adoration, and joy. Beneath the encrustations of many years, here was a newly discovered image of the joy of Christmas, right there at the place where Jesus was born.

Dear friends, we are gathered tonight to celebrate the birth of Jesus, and our attitude should be that of the newly discovered angel: amazement, adoration, and joy. The angel’s hands are extended, in an attitude of wonder, but also showing a desire to reach out and embrace the newborn Jesus. Every time we celebrate Christmas and contemplate the birth of Jesus, we should have that same spirit of amazement and wonder. My God, how wonderful that you have given us this child, your Son, to be our Savior. How amazing it is that he was born as a helpless infant. He could have come as a man of power, but he comes humbly, into the lives of humble, ordinary people. It’s easy to become blasé about the mystery of Christmas. It has become so commercialized and secularized in the popular culture, so covered over, that we might be tempted to take it for granted.

But Christmas is a time for renewal, a time for wonder and amazement at the gift we have received, the Christ-child, the Son of God born of Mary. Pray for the gift of wonder, and like the angel reach out to this newborn infant. Welcome him into your life, every corner of your life, even those darkened niches that have been covered over and shielded from him. Reach out to him, and he will reach up to you, with the tiny hands that created the world, the same hands that one day would be stretched out on the cross to save us from our sins.

The newly discovered angel is also in an attitude of adoration, with head bowed, gazing on Jesus. And as the song says, we too must come and adore him. First, we can’t help but stop before the manger scene and whisper a prayer, because this isn’t just any child. This is God in the flesh, the Second Person of the Trinity in the guise of an infant. It’s so easy to breeze past the mystery of the child of Bethlehem, but we would be missing something if we passed by too quickly. In the stillness of this holy night, and even in the midst of loud celebration, we all need to simply adore, worship, pray to the One who came to save us. If he had come in majesty, we might have feared him and kept our distance. But Jesus comes as a babe to elicit our love, so we’ll draw near and look on him with love. Make no mistake, there is power in that manger. He is the God-man, the Word that God uttered to bring forth the universe and all that is in it. His little hands can’t reach the animals around him, but he is the Creator of them all.

But his greatest power is love, and that's what comes through to us as we adore him in the manger. He set aside his majesty and power, and he took on our humanity out of love for us. He made himself helpless, so we would not be fearful to come close. He invites us into that stable, and shows us that the greatest power of God is love, a love that gives up all things for others. The wood of the manger is a foreshadowing of the wood of the cross, where this love would reach its apex. So, let us come and adore. And not just today or tomorrow, but always. Let us constantly return in adoration to the One who knew us from all eternity and now comes into our world to save us from sin and death. Come, let us adore him.

And how can we not be filled with joy? Luke tells us that a multitude of angels cried out with joy, "Glory to God in the highest!" They were filled with exultation and joy at the wonder that was taking place. Our newly discovered angel has that same expression of joy, joy at the great things God has done, joy at the realization that sin and death will be conquered, and our hope is restored. A French philosopher says that "joy is the most infallible sign of God's presence." And that's what Christmas is all about: Emmanuel, God is with us. What could give us greater joy?

We all know that the world chases after joy in many ways, but there is only one true source of lasting joy, and that is Jesus himself. He comes to do for us what we could never do for ourselves. He frees us from sin through God's mercy and forgiveness. He defeats death so we will have hope for eternal life. This little child, born in a remote village, has given us a reason for rejoicing that no one else can match. His birth is the opening of a door to heaven, the promise of eternal peace and joy, and he invites us to enter in with him. There are many causes for sadness in this world; we can't escape them and they'll always be around us. But we can be joyful anyway, because Christ is born for us. My friends, the world needs joy. They need to experience the joy of believing in Christ. Let's be sure to share the authentic joy of Christmas.

Christ is born for us! Let us come to him with amazement, adoration, and joy.