Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God
January 1, 2014
Satin Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
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You must remember this,
a kiss is just a kiss,
a sigh is just a sigh,
the fundamental things apply as time goes by.

What movie is that from? Casablanca! In 1942, Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman starred in one of the greatest movies ever made.

It’s set in North Africa during World War II. Humphrey Bogart’s character, Rick, runs a café and gambling establishment. His former love interest, played by Ingrid Bergman, arrives there with her new husband.

It’s a story of love, and love lost. Of war and cruelty. Toward the end of the movie, Rick helps his former lover and her husband to escape – thus saving their lives.

That climactic scene takes place at the airport. And once Ingrid Bergman is safely on the plane, Humphrey Bogart and Claude Rains conspire to cover up the truth. Humphrey says, “Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.” And then – the two walk off, into the fog of the night… and the movie ends.

It’s a great ending to a great movie. But I want to know: “What happens next?” But the movie does not answer that question.

As we’ve seen the story unfold, we’ve come to care about these people. And I want to know – does Ingrid make it to freedom? Does Humphrey survive the war? Do they ever see each other again?

I want to know what happens to them, as time goes by!

But we’ll never know. They just walk off into the fog.

In a sense, the same thing is happening in tonight’s Gospel. We see people that we’ve come to care about. We see the shepherds. And by the end of this Gospel passage, the shepherds walk away, into the fog of history, and we never hear from them again.
But I want to know – what happens to them next? The shepherds are some of the most engaging characters in the Christmas story!

When we first meet them, they are out in the field, keeping watch over their flocks. It’s dirty, smelly work. *Because* it’s dirty and smelly, shepherds were looked down upon by their nicer, cleaner neighbors.

But it was to these social outcasts that the angel of the Lord appears. The sky that night was suddenly filled with music. The message was amazing – a savior has been born for you!

They hastened to Bethlehem. And everything was just as the angel foretold. The shepherds repeated their story of the angels. All were amazed. Mary ponders.

And then? Luke tells us that the shepherds returned to their flocks… *and we never hear from them again.* The Gospels don’t tell us anything else about these shepherds. They walk off into the fog of history.

To which I say – *what happens next?* As Disney might put it, did they live ‘happily ever after?’ Remember, the shepherds had actually seen the Christ child! So did they live peaceful, blessed lives for decades to come?

Probably not! After all, Mary herself was the MOTHER of Jesus, the MOTHER of God. And *she* did not live ‘happily ever after.’

Even though Mary was the one who gave birth to Christ, her life was still filled with challenges, and even heartbreak. Being a disciple of Jesus does *not* mean that our lives will be free from pain, free from struggle, free from loss.

As Mary teaches us, the *joy* of being a disciple comes from knowing that Christ is WITH US in our pain, in our struggle, in our loss!

So, no. The shepherds did *not* return to a life where everything was easy.

So… what happened to them? Did some of them become followers of Jesus once he grew up? Were some of them secretly thrilled when Jesus spoke of shepherds and sheep in so many of his sermons? When Jesus said, “I am the Good Shepherd,” was that his way of acknowledging those who came to visit him when he was an infant?

People did not speak kindly of shepherds back then. Perhaps Mary had told Jesus about the
kindness of those smelly visitors on that night of his birth.

Were some of them there when he multiplied the loaves and fed 5000? And, more frighteningly, could some of them have been in the crowd, shouting “Crucify him” on Good Friday, because they did not recognize that this prisoner in Jerusalem was the baby they had seen in Bethlehem? *We don’t know.*

What happens to these shepherds as time goes by?

We can’t know for certain. But we *can* pay attention to one fact. The last time we see the shepherds, they are doing something vitally important. Luke tells us that, as the shepherds departed into the mist of history, they were “Glorifying and praising God for what they had seen.”

Got that? They were remembering what they had seen, and they were praising God for the blessing they had received.

As time goes by, I suspect that the shepherds *kept* doing that. Remembering. Glorifying. Praising. They *went back* to daily life, with smelly work to do, with children who did not always listen, with spouses who did not always agree.

They went back to a society in which they were still looked down upon. They got cold in winter, and hot in summer. They struggled.

But the last time we see these shepherds – they were *remembering*… and *praising*… and *glorifying God*. And I have to believe that these shepherds *kept* remembering, and kept praising God.

They *would* not forget. They *could* not forget. They had been blessed. And the rest of their lives would be blessed if they kept remembering, and kept praising.

As time goes by, we need to keep these shepherds in mind. As one year gives way to another, the story of our lives continues to unfold. And as this New Year begins, I believe that Christ is asking *us* to do what the *shepherds* did. Remember what you’ve seen. Glorify God. Praise God.

Remember what you’ve seen: how was God at work in your life in 2013? What blessings came your way? What message brought you hope in the darkness of your night? How did the Lord bless and strengthen you in the past?

And, as time goes by – *remember* that, and let the memory of that blessing be your source of joy,
and strength, and hope, even in those times when you struggle and doubt and lose.

And, like the shepherds, become messengers of Christ as your return to home and work. The world yearns for peace; the poor cry for justice; the hungry reach for bread; the sick pray for healing; the lonely look for someone to break their isolation.

Their prayers will be answered, our world will be blessed, only if we – who have seen the power of Christ at work – go, and tell the story with joy and hope.

Mary, the mother of God, saw the spirit of God at work; she welcomed the message; she pondered its meaning. She held Jesus in her arms, and later followed him.

We hold Jesus - in our hands - in the bread broken and the wine poured out, and we are called to follow him as one year yields to another. Remember. Praise. Glorify him.

The world will always welcome lovers of Jesus, as time goes by.

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