

Thank you all for being here. And thanks also to our many volunteers who arrange and decorate our worship spaces, our many volunteers who serve as ministers for Mass and who lead us in song, and the many donors who remember loved ones through our Christmas flower fund. And welcome to our many visitors. Thank you all.

Whether we have spent significant time spiritually preparing for the coming of Jesus in our hearts, or this one hour here at church is all the time we have set aside - whatever the case - let's take a deep breath and give the Lord a chance to find a place in our hearts.

This is no time for an over-sentimentalized understanding of the incredible - and historically reliable - event we hear in this Gospel. At the time there were real villains - real historical villains ready to kill to prevent Jesus from finding a place in our hearts. There were real forces that could have broken up Jesus' family. There were government rules and rulers who made them travel to Bethlehem for the census, then made them run for their lives to a faraway land. In the midst of all this stress - and I'm guessing that Jesus' family was under a bit more stress than the average family here - in the midst of all this - the angels came.

In our brief moment of quiet right here, maybe we can reflect on the reality of the Christmas season - the manifestation of Jesus who came to walk with us in our world - and what that means in our lives.

The child born in Bethlehem was not simply a great prophet, not simply a miracle worker, not simply someone specially chosen by God. The child born in Bethlehem is the Son of God. We are here to celebrate the coming of the Son of God who became a poor child in a human family.

The angels announced the birth of this newborn King to shepherds to show his mercy and power to those who were humble of heart and ready to receive him into their hearts.

In today's Gospel, maybe we noticed the words of the angels: "a savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord." And then: "on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

Way back in the 500s - no, not the 50s - about 15 hundred years ago, Gregory the Great in his Christmas sermon explains the significance of the angels' hymn of glory and their message to the shepherds: *Before Jesus was born in the flesh, there seemed to be a lot of friction between us and the angels. All of humanity was separated in many ways from God, the angels as God's subjects seemed to cut us off from their fellowship. But with the arrival of Jesus our Lord, the angels receive us as fellow citizens of God's Kingdom. Because the King of heaven has taken on the flesh of our earth, the angels from their heavenly heights no longer look down upon our flaws and our weaknesses. Now the angels are at peace with us. Now they honor us as friends, whom before they considered to be weak and despised.*

So when we look at the state of our lives and our world, where is there room for Jesus and the peace of his presence? Maybe there is some room in our hearts to allow Jesus to be with us for a few minutes of prayer even during our busy days and nights. Prayer with the angels around us, prayer in the car, prayer with our kids. Maybe there is some room in our hearts to allow Jesus to be with us and our kids in re-telling this story of Jesus' birth at home. Maybe there is room in our hearts for the forgiveness Jesus showed us through his life here on earth. If the angels at Jesus' birth no longer looked down upon our flaws and our weaknesses, maybe we can find a path to the forgiveness of others in our lives and forgiveness of ourselves.

Maybe there is room in our hearts for Jesus to help us notice the beauty of God's gift of life around us. Jesus' ways are different from our ways, so maybe we can find room in our hearts to help us see others as Jesus does. Maybe there is room in our hearts to let Jesus sit with us in the sadness that Christmas brings to some of us. Maybe there is some room in our hearts for

gathering every weekend with other Catholic Christians to worship as our Lord Jesus has taught us.

Finding a place for Jesus in our hearts leads to the peace announced by the angels for those on whom his favor rests. If Jesus found a place with us here on earth, coming to us as a baby born in obscurity and lowliness and poverty and simplicity in the little town of Bethlehem, he can find a place in the hearts of each of us. By sharing in our life, he showed us that there is goodness in the life he gave all of us.

We begin the rest of our Christmas season and the rest of our faith lives by joining the angelic choirs of heaven participating in the Eucharist here at this table today. When we have found a place for Jesus in our hearts, we are ready to undertake the way of life described for us by the angels in today's Gospel. The same God who came to us as a child born in Bethlehem, is about to come down on this altar, sacramentally, under the appearance of bread and wine in this Eucharist. Jesus did come to us as a human, but he comes to us today as our food and drink. So when we eat and drink the true presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, we find a place for the presence of Jesus in our hearts. We then take the presence and the peace of Jesus out into our world as his disciples.

Amen?

- Deacon Jack Schaefer