

This Sunday, January 1, 2017 we celebrate the Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God with this Gospel reading from Luke: "The shepherds went in haste to Bethlehem and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known the message that had been told them about this child. All who heard it were amazed by what had been told them by the shepherds. And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told to them.

When eight days were completed for his circumcision, he was named Jesus, the name given him by the angel before he was conceived in the womb."

This Sunday is also my 65th birthday. I'm not sure what turning 65 means today to various age groups in America, but when I was growing up in the '50's and '60's, it was one of those milestone birthdays, like turning 16 and getting a driver's license. Attaining 65 meant the beginning of a life of leisure and enjoying the fruits of decades of labor.

My child image of being 65 has blurred some, but it remains a milestone day to me. I can't help but look back at other important days in my life like my wedding day or the birth of my kids and grandkids. Thinking back, it seems there are just a small handful of days in a person's life that truly stand out and are special and joyous above all others. That's remarkable, when I think that the 65 years of my own life has consisted of 23,725 days!!!!

In today's Gospel reading, the shepherds visit the baby in the manger, the Angel's message to them is verified and the Blessed Virgin Mary names Jesus. This baby of all babies has a name, adding to his reality and someone we can know, trust and believe in.

Among all stand out days in my life, there is one I have come to realize and appreciate as my most special day of all and it is *all* about this child named Jesus. It was the day at a Baptist worship service that I heard the call of Jesus, said "yes" and accepted him into my heart as my Lord and Savior. I was 11 years old. I've since converted to Catholicism and through the grace and mercy of God my relationship with Jesus has grown stronger. Through the many ups and downs of my 65 year long faith journey, I have come to believe there is a huge difference between passively knowing Jesus Christ and actively accepting him into one's heart as an ever present guide and source of strength and love.

Our task is simple; just say "yes" to Jesus Christ. For me at age 11, it was a deeply joyous and spiritual experience. During my 20's, 30's and 40's, I sometimes focused more on my life's activities than on Jesus. I am so thankful that he never completely left my heart or abandoned me. Saying "yes" to Jesus, maintaining a relationship with him and serving him is not always easy. But if we stay focused on the simplicity of following him, it's the most rewarding and life fulfilling thing there is on Earth. Thank you God and thank you Blessed Virgin on this special day we celebrate you.

Dave Sanders