

Feast of the Holy Family, December 30-31, 2017
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
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She ran toward the nativity scene, shouting with glee: “He’s here! Baby Jesus is here!”

Then, with a look of bliss on her face, she started to dance in a circle, clapping her hands, and singing, “Silent Night.”

Now, I have never thought of “Silent Dance” as a dance song, but it didn’t matter. This little girl was singing and rejoicing. And when her family finally caught up with her, she started all over and shouted – “He’s here!”

This all took place just a few weeks ago at the Jefferson Hotel in downtown Richmond. I go there every year to enjoy the Christmas decorations.

And every year, I write a letter to the general manager, thanking The Jefferson for including a manger scene in Richmond’s most beautiful Christmas location.

So a few weeks ago, I was standing near the hotels’ manger scene. That’s when I saw this little girl run ahead of her family. When she saw baby Jesus in the straw, she reacted with singing and dancing. “Jesus is here,” she shouted!

And I asked myself, “When did I stop reacting with uncontrolled joy to the presence of the Lord?”

When we read the Gospel of Luke, it is interesting to notice how EVERYONE reacts when they find out that Jesus has arrived. In Luke’s Gospel, when people find out that God is in our midst, they start leaping, singing, rejoicing, dancing.

It’s like a Gene Kelly movie musical! Every three minutes, someone is singing, someone is tapping their toes, clapping their hands and shouting, “Jesus is here!” The joy is contagious.

Think about it. When Zechariah finds out that he and his wife, Elizabeth, are going to have a baby, even though they are both well past childbearing years, eventually Zechariah bursts into song:

Blest be the Lord, the God of Israel, he has come to his people and set them free!

When Mary and Elizabeth meet, they are both carrying miraculous children in their wombs. What happens? Well, John the Baptist *leaps* in his mother's womb, because he knows that Jesus is near. Every woman who has ever carried a child, you know what it feels like when they start to leap inside you.

Right after that, Mary bursts into song:

Proclaim the greatness of God, rejoice in God my savior.

When the Shepherds are surprised by the angel, who announces the birth of Christ, the "Mormon Tabernacle Angelic choir" starts singing "*Gloria in excelsis deo!*"

And in today's Gospel, when Simeon sees Mary, Joseph and Jesus entering the Temple, he knows that what he has longed for has finally come to pass. God has sent the savior. Our hopes are being fulfilled. Our healing has begun. And guess what Simeon does? He sings:

My eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared for all people, a light to enlighten the Gentiles, and give glory to Israel your servant!

In these first chapters of Luke's Gospel, everyone is like the little girl at the Jefferson Hotel. When they find out that Jesus is here, they rejoice. They sing. They leap. They can't help themselves. Jesus is here. The joy is contagious.

Why *can't* they help themselves? Well, I think it's because they all understand that now that Jesus is here, nothing will ever be the same again. God is *now* in our midst. God is so close to us that we are never alone. God sent his Son to become one of us, so that *all* of us can be brought home to God. And while we're on that journey, Jesus is walking right beside us. He's here! And nothing is the same.

Think of it this way: when people realized that a child had been born of a virgin, they understood that God was *putting life where life shouldn't be possible*.

No new life should happen in the womb of a virgin. The womb of a virgin? That stays empty. No new life is conceived there.

And yet, when the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, he revealed that God had decided to put life *where no life should happen...* to bring hope to what should remain empty and barren.

When God decides to create life where life shouldn't happen, then the world has been turned upside down. And nothing will ever be the same.

Perhaps that's why everyone in Luke's Gospel is singing and dancing! God has changed the rules! Doesn't that get your toe tapping?

This good news *should* get us singing and rejoicing if we understand what this means for us.

God has consistently proven himself to be the one who can create life where no life seems possible.

Abraham and Sarah, in today's first reading, had run out of hope. Abraham was old. Sarah was beyond childbearing years. Their hope for a child was gone.

And then God said, "Watch me! Watch me put life where you don't think it can happen." And Isaac was born. And God's covenant with Israel was underway.

Zachariah and Elizabeth were old, childless and out of hope. And God said, "Watch me! Watch me put life where you don't think it can happen." And John the Baptist was born.

Mary was a virgin. But God said, "Watch me! Watch me put life where you don't think it can happen." And Jesus is born.

And later in the Gospels, they put the crucified body of Jesus in a tomb. Is there any place MORE lifeless than a tomb? Is there is any place where hope seems more impossible? Is there any place more guaranteed to crush our spirits?

And on that first Easter Sunday, God says, "Watch me. Watch me put life where you don't think it can happen." Jesus is raised. And we rise with him. (Are you ready to start singing yet?)

This is not theological theory. Since I am a human being, I stand before you with parts of my life that feel lifeless. Perhaps there are parts of your life that feel lifeless too?

There are parts of my experience that feel so empty, so broken that I don't think there is any hope for healing.

Is there some part of *you* that feels so worn down that you find yourself saying, "Nothing new can happen there?" Do you find yourself looking at your daily life, your relationships, your work, your future, and you say: "There is no hope. It's going to stay empty."

Well, I have song-inducing news for you! Jesus is here! And when God sent Jesus into the womb of a virgin, he showed us that he was changing everything. God wants to create life precisely

where you and I think life cannot happen, including those parts of our lives that feel barren. Jesus is here... to heal you.

And if we, the Christian people, would start regaining some of the unfiltered joy of that little girl at the Jefferson (instead of looking bored and uninterested), then perhaps more and more of our suffering neighbors would begin to realize that the hope they seek, the life they long for, the healing they desire, is found in only one place ... it is found in the child who was laid in a manger.

Think of how many people in our world are living without hope. If we Christians live with joy, it will attract the hopeless to the one who is the Source of hope.

There are so many people who experience a grinding emptiness. Maybe they have empty bellies and empty pockets.

Maybe they see they see a future full of emptiness, because their children are trapped in bad schools, trapped in a cycle of victimhood, trapped by the crushing weight of racism, or drug addiction, or violence.

Maybe life feels empty because of angry rhetoric, divisive political discourse, international tension.

Where do the Empty go with their emptiness? Well, if Christians would start living with authentic joy, others will see the joy with which we *live*, the joy with which we *give*, the joy with which we *serve*, the joy with which we work for justice... and they will be drawn closer to the child of Bethlehem.

That little girl at the hotel has inspired me to choose. I choose to recognize that Jesus is with me in every situation. He is near. He is here. He brings life where no life seems possible. He brings hope and healing in every situation. He will guide me home. Everything has changed.

That is such good news, I may have to sing and clap and rejoice and dance my way through 2018. Anyone want to join me?