

Christmas 2018
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael A. Renninger

*Oh, you better watch out, you better not cry,
better not pout I'm telling you why...*

When I was a little boy, there was so much about Christmas that I loved.

I loved baking cookies with my parents and my brother. This is back before some lawyer had determined that children shouldn't eat raw cookie dough. My brother and I would put a spoonful of raw chocolate chip cookie dough on the baking sheet, and then we'd eat a spoonful of the same dough. Somehow we survived.

I loved going with my family to cut a fresh tree from a local tree farm. That worked well, until the year that we cut the tree, put it up in the house, and then discovered that the tree was home to a snake... *Oh what fun it is to scream!*

I loved Christmas Eve dinner at my grandparents' house. One year, my parents decided that I couldn't go to the party because I had a fever. I whined enough that they finally relented. And after dinner, I opened my grandmother's gift to me – a beautiful Steve Carlton Phillies baseball shirt. I was so happy to receive this gift - so I promptly threw up all over it. "God bless us, every one!"

And another thing I loved about Christmas: each year, I told myself that I would stay up late enough to see Santa when he arrived. Or maybe I could hear the reindeer on the roof. But every year, I fell asleep. And when I woke on Christmas morning, I was amazed by the fact that Santa could come to our house, deliver all those packages, and leave... and he did it so *quietly*. It's amazing: Santa arrives, and we don't know he's there. He is not seeking attention. He comes, gives us an amazing gift, and he does it so humbly and gently that a young boy can sleep right through it.

A few days ago, I was teaching some of the students here at St. Mary's School. We were talking about the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. One little boy asked, "Why do you think that Jesus was born in a stable?"

Before I could answer, a little girl raised her hand and said, "Well, if Jesus had been born in a palace, then only the rich people could go and visit him. But since he was born in a stable, even poor people could visit him."

This little girl is already a great theologian!

Have you ever thought about how *quietly*, how *humbly*, how *gently*, Jesus comes into the world?

On one hand, it would have made sense for his birth to be surrounded by all of the earthly trappings of power and prestige. After all, Jesus is the Son of God! He is God in the flesh! He has come to save us, to set things right, to bring us hope, to heal our hearts. He has come to conquer heartbreak and death. God has come to the earth!

And on earth, when an important person is coming, we get ready. We hire the marching band, put up signs, call the cable news folks. If a world leader were coming to Short Pump, we would get them a room at a nice hotel on west Broad Street, or maybe even at the Jefferson Hotel downtown. We would roll out the red carpet, and pay attention to them.

But here is God, coming to the earth to save us. And he is humble, quiet and unnoticed, doing his good work late at night.

He is born in a room where animals and people spend the night. Full of dust and smells. God is born in the flesh, the one who is powerful enough to conquer death. But the powerful people on earth don't notice what is happening. Caesar is asleep in Rome. King Herod doesn't notice his arrival, the soldiers of the Roman Army have dozed off.

The human being who changed all of human history is born in Bethlehem. And he is born in the silence of a night. No signs. No TV coverage. No parades. Just a mom, and a dad, a stable and some straw. Most people woke up the next morning, and they had missed the whole thing.

Why did God come to us with such *humility*?

Well, I think the little girl at St. Mary's school was absolutely right.

If Jesus had been born in a luxurious place, then people would conclude that money is what is most important in life.

If Jesus had been born in an expensive hotel, then only the people rich enough to stay at that hotel could have gotten near him.

If Jesus had been born as the son of the emperor in Rome, then people would conclude that the most helpful thing in life is to be born into an important, well-connected family.

If Jesus had been the son of a general, then people would conclude that military power and physical strength are the ways that you fix all of the world's problems.

But that's not how it happened.

He was born in a dusty little corner of a poor section of an occupied nation. He was born to a couple of parents who were not very important according to the world's judgment – a young woman, and a handyman from Nazareth. They were nobody special, and their baby was born in an ordinary, dusty way.

Why? Because Jesus did not come to the earth just to help the powerful, the rich, the famous, the strong, the bold and the beautiful. He was born in an ordinary place because he came to *save* ordinary people – like us. He came to *love* ordinary people – like us. He came to *embrace* ordinary people – like us.

The folks who visited him on the night of his birth were not the rich, famous, or well-connected. It was a group of shepherds – shepherds, who had been out with their smelly sheep on a smelly hillside sleeping on the hard ground. Poor Mary and Joseph – it was bad enough that their child was born surrounded by smelly animals. Did Mary turn to Joseph and ask, “Who sent these smelly shepherds here for a visit?”

Who sent them? *God did.* God chose to be born in humble, imperfect surroundings, because God came to save humble, imperfect people.

For those of us who are humble enough to admit how imperfect our lives are, the birth of Jesus is more miraculous than ever. For those of us who are humble enough to admit how much is broken in us, the birth of Jesus becomes the miraculous moment when our healing begins.

And if we call ourselves Christians, if we call ourselves followers of Jesus, then our daily vocation is to be humble enough to bring love and healing, peace and generosity, to people who think that no one cares for them. We are called to bring generous love to the people who still think there is no room for them, not even room in God's heart.

As the little girl said, if Jesus had been born in a palace, only the powerful people could have visited him. But he was born in a humble place, so that ordinary folk could draw near. And on this Christmas night, he is humble enough to come to us in a simple way: a bit of bread, a sip of wine, placed on a table made of wood.

O come, let us adore him....

Copyright 2018 by Rev. Michael A. Renninger. All rights reserved.