

Christmas Homily, 2019
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael A. Renninger

Sing along with me now:

I'm dreamin' of a white Christmas... just like the ones I used to know...

Then how the reindeer loved him...

You're a mean one... Mister Grinch...

Sleep in heavenly peace... sleep in heavenly peace...

There is so much I love about Christmas. I love family memories. I love the cookies. I love the presents. I love *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Polar Express*. I love the twinkle lights on the tree. I love baby Jesus. (Did I mentioned that I love the presents?)

And... I love the music. No matter what song or carol comes on the radio, I smile and start to sing along (even if it's that annoying Brenda Lee singing "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree!")

I think I like every Christmas song. But that wasn't true for my mom. Mom loved MOST of the songs that we sing at Christmas, but there was one carol she just couldn't stand. And it's this one:

Away in a manger no crib for a bed...

If mom heard that song, she would shake her head and mutter to herself, "Ridiculous." If we sang it at church, mom would close her hymnal and sit quietly.

Eventually, when I was a young adult, I asked my mom what it was about that song that she did not like. And she told me.

She did not like this line: "*But little Lord Jesus no crying he makes.*"

Mom didn't like that line, because she thought it wasn't true. "Every child cries!" she said. "Every human baby cries and makes noise."

Then mom said, “If baby Jesus didn’t cry, then he wasn’t really human. *He* cried, and his *mother* cried.”

I interrupted and asked, “Why did the Virgin Mary cry?” Mom replied, “that is a question only a male would ask!”

My mom explained that giving birth is hard work. It hurts (she should know! When I was born I weighed 10 pounds, 6 ounces!). Giving birth is exhausting, messy and sometimes even dangerous.

There was nothing perfect about the birth of Jesus.

Mary felt the strain of birth. And she gave birth in a smelly place surrounded by animals because her husband couldn’t remember to make reservations at the Holiday Inn!

As we continued talking, my mom said something like this: “Mikey, Jesus came to save *us*. We are not *perfect* people. We are *real* people. We face real problems. We live in a real world that is sometimes beautiful and sometimes messy. Sometimes we are happy. Sometimes we cry. And when Jesus came, he came to save *all* of that. Not just the *nice* parts. He came to show us that God’s love is powerful and real at *every* step of our journey. Even when we cry. So Jesus cried too.”

(By the way, the shortest verse in the Bible happens as Jesus’s heart is breaking because his friend Lazarus had died. What is the shortest verse in the Bible? “Jesus wept” (John 11:35). He loves us, and love makes us vulnerable. Vulnerable even to tears.)

When the Bible tell us about the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, people have a variety of reactions. We read about people who are rejoicing. Then, and now, people had to struggle in their daily lives. But on that first Christmas night, God invited us to stop staring at the things that burden and frighten us, so that we could spend at least a little time saying ‘thank you.’

Thank you, Lord, for blessings. Thank you for love. Thank you for life. Thank you for this beautiful planet, for beautiful music, for a beautiful birth in a surprising place. God is with us. *Emmanuel*. That is worth celebrating. Rejoice!

And, in the stories of Jesus’ birth, there are people who are struggling with difficult circumstances, hard choices, rough times. Some people in the Christmas Gospels even cry.

Not everyone has an easy time of it in the Christmas stories. Mary was about 8 months pregnant when Joseph put her on a donkey for the three-day journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Mom’s

in the congregation – how would you like a three- day donkey ride when you’re 8 months pregnant?

No, this is not easy.

Mary gives birth in a strange place, in less-than-cleanly surroundings. Smelly shepherds show up at the door. Magi from the east arrive. Eventually Mary and Joseph have to flee because King Herod is threatening the life of Jesus. They become refugees in Egypt. In Matthew’s Gospel, people *die* in the Christmas narrative.

This is a real narrative, of tough people who face difficult circumstances. And in the midst of it, God is saying, “I am here. And if you look at my Son, you see my love, made flesh, in your world. Even when your world is hard to understand. Even when there is good reason to cry.”

The baby born in Bethlehem came to love and serve and save real people. Not the perfect folks who live in the fictional world of Hallmark Christmas movies. He came to save *us*.

Jesus came to love and serve and save people like the Magi – wise people with the ability to make a long trip and buy nice presents. Jesus came to love and save people whose lives seem to go smoothly.

The child born in Bethlehem came to love and serve and save families like his own family - who have to deal with heartbreaking situations. He came to love and save families who have to flee one country in order to seek safety in another. He came to love and save imperfect moms and dads who have to work hard.

The child born in Bethlehem came to love and save every person who ever feels as if their wonderful plans and dreams have been snatched away from them by a situation that is unfair, unjust or scary.

The child of Bethlehem comes to every one of us in our hours of darkness, disappointment, embarrassment, and fear. He comes to us, to love us and guide us by his perfect light. To teach us how to love others who are struggling or fleeing or afraid.

The child born in Bethlehem came to love and save people like... King Herod, and his troops, and everyone who thinks that violence is the solution to our problems.

The child born in Bethlehem came to love and save those who face illness, those who die too young, those whose lives are afflicted by violence.

If the 'non-crying' perfect Son of God were born into a perfect family, in a perfect town, at a perfect time, then his message would probably only apply to ... perfect people.

But the Son of God was born in a stable, with animal dust in the air and the odor of shepherds at the door.

The birth of Jesus reveals that God is present, here and now. Yes, he is present in all that is beautiful in your life. And the savior is also present in every aspect of your life, and our world, that is struggling, suffering, staggering, screaming, streaming with tears.

And that makes me want to cry, cry tears of joy, on this silent night.

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