

Feast of the Holy Family, December 28-29, 2019
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
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She found it in an old trunk in the attic. She wasn't even sure to whom the trunk belonged, but when she opened it she found what appeared to be a ledger book of some kind.

It turned out to be part of a diary that her great-great grandmother kept when she came to America in the 1850's. Her great-great grandmother fled poverty and oppression in Ireland, and found her way to Philadelphia.

The woman who found the diary thought she knew her great-great grandmother's story. But then she started to read the diary, and discovered a truth which troubled her to the core.

You see, her great-great grandmother came to America at a time when immigration from the Catholic countries in Europe had increased 500% in ten years. Cities were straining to accommodate these new immigrants, most of whom were poor and ill-educated.

In major cities, crime tripled. Fear became widespread. Among the Protestant citizens of these states, rumors began to spread – rumors that Catholic bishops would soon run this country, because they could 'force Catholics' to vote in certain ways.

As the great-great granddaughter read the diary, she was horrified by what her ancestor went through in Philadelphia. The "Know Nothing Party" was winning elections – a political party dedicated to keeping Catholic immigrants in their place.

Catholic Churches were burned. Law enforcement officials looked the other way.

When the great-great grandmother sought work, she saw signs all over Philadelphia: "Catholics need not apply."

She finally got a job cleaning the house of a wealthy Philadelphia banker. She was raped by the banker's son. When she went to the police, she was told that no jury would take an Irish immigrant seriously.

9 months later, she gave birth to a son. Out of wedlock. The banker fired her, accusing her of "immorality!"

The great-great granddaughter read this horrible tale, and she felt agitation in the pit of her stomach. She had nightmares about all of this. How had her ancestor survived?

Her stomach was tied up in knots. She lost weight. She went to a counsellor.

Then one day, she read an article about a Catholic organization which provides health care for immigrants in Texas. That night, she couldn't sleep. Something told her that while she couldn't change her great-great grandmother's experience, but she *could* do something to help immigrants now.

So she took some vacation time and went to Texas. And she found what she was looking for. Her turmoil turned to inner peace. In Philly, she was a doctor at a major hospital. But now she experienced peace, serving recent immigrants. Looking back now, she sees the wisdom of God at work.

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Most of us spent a good portion of this past week giving and receiving presents. I'll bet that we wrapped our gifts, so that they would delight the eye even before the recipient tore off the paper. We hope that our gifts will bring a smile to the face of the recipient, as soon as they open it.

After all, aren't gifts supposed to make us *happy*?

But that woman who found the diary also received a gift. And, for the longest time, that gift didn't make her happy at all. It gave her nightmares, and shook up her comfortable life. That gift made her go to a therapist!

Her happiness, her joy, her gratitude, only came in *retrospect*. She found peace when she moved to Texas and became a doctor who serves immigrant children. She discovered that God's greatest gifts to us often come, not wrapped in pretty paper, but wrapped in *our problems*.

When Matthew and Luke tell us about the birth of Jesus, they are telling us about the greatest gift God ever gave to the world. The gift is Jesus. Jesus, who is God's love made flesh. The gift is *Emmanuel* – God who entered the human experience, and God who is with us still. What a gift!

But have you noticed? When God gave this gift, practically everyone in the story is troubled, shook up, full of fear.

Herod hears about the gift of Jesus. And he flies into a violent rage. Herod orders that all the male children under the age of 2 should be killed. Herod is one of those adults who believe that the death of child is a perfect way to solve his problem.

Mary hears about the gift of Jesus. But Luke says that she is 'troubled,' and the angel has to say to her, "Don't be afraid."

And then there's Mary's fiancé. Joseph is told about the gift of Jesus, but his first instinct is to

ask himself, “How can I get out of this?” He wants to walk away. His dreams have turned to a nightmare.

And even after Joseph embraces Mary and is present for the birth of this Son, this gift... well, frankly, it continues to feel like a nightmare.

Were you *listening* to today’s Gospel reading?

The angel returns to Joseph, and not with words of comfort & joy! The angel says, “Joseph, get up. Run. Herod wants to kill the baby! Leave your home country. Flee to Egypt. Hide there.”

The Holy Family becomes an immigrant family. The Holy Family becomes a family of refugees, fleeing political violence at home. What was it like for them in Egypt? Matthew never tells us.

Now of course, the Gospel of Matthew was written years after all of these events took place. So, with the gift of hindsight, everyone who reads the Gospel of Matthew knows that Jesus really *is* a gift, and that God really *is* blessing the world by the birth of this boy, and the Holy Family eventually settles safely in Nazareth. In hindsight, we can see the blessing, we see the gift, we see how God was working it all out.

In *hindsight*.

But in the *middle* of all of that confusion, and violence, and the guy at the Inn who told them that ‘there was no room’ for them, I wonder if Joseph and Mary ever said to God, “You call this a gift? It feels like a disaster!”

Faithful, generous people have a consistent experience in the Bible. It’s this:

When God gives you a gift, first it *worries* you before it *blesses* you. *

God’s greatest gifts are often wrapped in things that feel like our greatest problems. The way that God plans to bless you is often outside the place that you expect to be blessed, just as the blessed gift of Jesus happened, not in the Inn, but in the stable.

What appears to be a catastrophe can turn out to be our greatest blessing. After all, when the boy of Bethlehem grew up to become the man of Galilee, he ended up *on a cross*. Does *that* look and feel like a gift? No! *It’s a horror!* But because God was at work there, the horror turned to hope, and death turned to life. Now THAT’S a gift!

When that dusty diary was discovered in the attic, the great-great granddaughter found herself troubled in spirit, tossing and turning on her bed, horrified by the kind of hatred that her ancestor experienced right here in ‘Christian’ America. She was deeply troubled.

But what did I say a moment ago? *When God gives us a gift, first the gift has to worry us before it blesses us.*

The woman who found the diary *let herself be worried*. Then she followed God's promptings, and found her vocation, serving refugees families in Texas. She found peace. She *is* blessed.

As you look back on the year 2019, perhaps hindsight will help you to see how God was at work in the circumstances of your life. Perhaps there are things that felt like a disaster, a disappointment that made you worry... but now you see how God was at work, leading you through those experiences to the blessing you now recognize.

And, in the year ahead, remember Mary and Joseph. And remember that doctor who moved to Texas. God gave all of them a gift – but it didn't feel like a gift when it was given. Don't give in to fear in the new year. Fear makes us give up on God too soon. Fear makes us give up on each other and ourselves too soon.

None of us can know for certain where God wants to take us in the New Year. None of us can know for certain whom God wants us to serve, and how God wants us to put flesh on the Gospel.

But we all need to pray that the Holy Spirit will help us to be open – open to *the trouble God wants to cause in our lives*, so that God can take us precisely where we should go.

*(*this phrase has been used by many preachers over the years, including T.D. Jakes who incorporated it into a number of outstanding sermons on the topic of fear.)*

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