

Christmas Day Homily

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Synod-wide Service

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We are finally here after all the planning and preparations. It is Christmas Day. Merry Christmas, everyone. Perhaps we are all celebrating somewhat differently from each other as we draw on our own family traditions and add the special touches that give meaning to the festivities. Perhaps there are some of the usual hopes and anxieties. We want this to be perfect. We want to give the special people in our lives the perfect gifts. We want everyone who has gathered to get along perfectly—without complaints or irritations. We want all our loved ones to be connected, near and far, preferably here but also on our phones or computer screens. We want all the meal preparations to come together in just the right way and the table to be set just so. We want everyone to be healthy. We want that magical joy we might remember from childhood to sparkle in our hearts and our laughter. We want it to be the best Christmas, unmarred by minor or major disappointments, unmarred by unexpected complications.

It is hard to say how some of our high expectations for Christmas have come about, but when we go back to the very first Christmas, it was hardly the perfect Christmas story. There were complications galore. Mary discovered she was pregnant with one of the most high-profile unplanned pregnancies known in history. She wasn't even married yet and Joseph had nothing to do with it. Joseph discovered his fiancé was with child and had it in his heart to simply divorce her quietly with as little scandal as possible until an angel advised him to stay with her. Then there was a census to be taken, and Mary and Joseph had to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, an arduous trek of at least four days, and Mary was journeying in the final stages of her pregnancy. Whether she was on donkey or on foot, those of you who have given birth can imagine what that 90-mile trip might have been like. Then there was no room anywhere for them to stay in Bethlehem, overcrowded with other travelers arriving for the same reason. They found a barn, a stable, a place among the animals, and suddenly it was Mary's time, and the baby came, and the only place to lay him down was in a feeding trough among the animals. We can turn this into a sentimental children's story, but the truth is that this first Christmas had a lot of genuine challenges. It was hardly the perfect Christmas as Christmas's go.

And yet, and yet, the wonder of it all that surpasses our expectations of perfection. God chose this way to enter the world, on human terms, in a messy, complicated set of circumstances. God chose an unwed mother, a potential scandal, a long, hard journey, a birthing room hardly fit for humans. God chose as the first guests some lowly shepherds, smelling like sheep themselves, hardly knowing what to expect when they stumbled breathless into that manger scene. God chose the lowly, the weak, the humble, the meek, the startled, the struggling, the weary, the unlikely. And God also chose the name, Emmanuel, meaning God with us. God chose the name Jesus—meaning the Lord is our salvation; our God saves. God chose to come in the dark of night to bring the promise of light and hope to a shadowy, heavy world. God chose a very small package untidily wrapped, a vulnerable newborn, swathed in bands of cloth to mark the incarnation: God's chose to enter the world absent of royal fanfare but with angels singing from on high in an open field to give us promises that last.

The promise is Emmanuel, God still dwells among us; the promise is Jesus; God still saves us through the Christ child coming into our world. God chose to promise in a very intimate way that God is still here now and with us every day, to join us in our joys, to comfort us in our disappointments, to meet us in our loneliness, to laugh with us in our delights, to mourn with us in our grief, and importantly to be with us in all our ordinary mundane moments, that make up our lifetimes and that reach with hope beyond the limits of earth and time. Today we remember the first Christmas, messy and wondrous as it was, and we recall why it still matters: because God is still among us in our messy, wondrous lives. The incarnation is real. God's saving grace is real. Oh, how perfectly wonderful is that. Let this living story touch your hearts. God is with us now and always. Merry Christmas, everyone. Amen.