

Solemnity of Christmas – December 25, 2016 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 12am and 10am Masses – 1,000 words

In order for us to understand the meaning of this feast, it is helpful for us to go back in time and imagine ourselves as living in ancient Israel. How did the Jewish people relate to God? What was their image of him? For them, God was visible in the powerful forces of nature. Think about the tornadoes that went through our area back in 2011. Think about the destruction wrought by Hurricane Katrina. Think about those recent earthquakes in Italy. These, and so many other signs in the realm of nature, would have been taken as evidence of the presence and action of God in the world. And we must say it: considering those signs in that way leads to a rather negative, frightful conception of God.

How else did the Israelites know God? They knew him through Sacred Scripture and through their religious traditions. These sources taught them how, through powerful signs and displays of strength, God had intervened and acted in their common history. The Lord cast Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden and placed a fiery revolving sword to block their re-entrance into that garden. Later he would send a flood to wipe out the face of the earth, with only eight people, led by Noah, surviving. Still later, he would lead his people out of Egypt through Moses, accompanied by great signs and wonders. All of these events and so many more in the history of Israel speak to us of God's love and salvation if we study them. But they also point to a God who is strong and... dare we say it, somewhat scary.

The gospel of Luke recounts Christ's birth to us saying: "Now there were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock. The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and *they were struck with great fear*. The angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.'" Notice the reaction of the shepherds when the angel of the Lord came to them: they were afraid! The God of wonders, the God of power and might was speaking to them! But the angel quickly corrects them: do not be afraid... go and see the little child lying in a manger. God is not scary and abstract; he is a little baby with arms wide open. The Lord has a human face. There could not be a more disarming image of God.

Doesn't the Lord sometimes seem to us as abstract and fearsome? But that is not our religion! To be sure, there are those in the world today who have this conception of God. But not us. Tonight we celebrate that event which really took place some 2016 years ago, when the unchanging God came into our world to correct our conception of him, and *to save us*. He is the God of love, the God of mercy, the God who comes down to our level in order to lift us up to himself. He comes to us as a vulnerable little child, inviting our vulnerable side to open up to him and receive him into our lives.

So we take our place with those ancient shepherds beside the manger, to adore the little Christ child. And we do so here at this holy Mass, where Christ will come into our presence in a most real way through the Holy Eucharist that we celebrate. The manger was the container from which the animals ate; Christ transformed it and made it the table from which men and women of goodwill eat. He came into our midst as a little baby then; now he comes among us under the humble and disarming signs of bread and wine. The infinite God, the God of power and might, so humbles himself as to become smaller than us, so that we can consume him and receive him into our own bodies and souls. Thus with the Holy Eucharist, the mystery of Christmas continues every Sunday and indeed, every day of the year, on the altars of the Church.

It is good for us to be here, then, on this holy night/day. This feast is an invitation for each and every one of us to receive the Lord more fully into our lives. He sends his angel to us saying, "Do not be afraid". But we *are* sometimes afraid. We are afraid that God might take something away from us. He might limit our freedom. Or we are afraid because of our own history of sinfulness. We are afraid that somehow, *God will not accept us*. But let us examine these fears in a rational manner, based on what God himself has revealed: look at the manger! Look at the little baby! Look at the Cross! Look at how he continues to give himself to us fully through the Holy Eucharist! See how he offers to forgive our sins through the Sacrament of Confession! How could we not receive him, and be received by him? He loves us so much!

The Lord is offering each one of us a gift on this holy night/day: the gift of himself. I pray that each one of us will receive him into our hearts this night/day, and so enter the New Year in a deeper relationship with him. In the midst of a world of empty promises, false hopes, and abundant fear, the Lord comes to offer us true freedom and true happiness. The angel says to us this night/day: Do not be afraid!

A blessed and merry Christmas to you all!