

**Fr. Nick Dant's Homily, Saint Matthew Catholic Church, Indianapolis**  
**The Solemnity of Christmas, Dec. 24-25, 2018, Mass at Night, Cycle C**

As we do every year at Christmas Night Mass, we hear the Apostle Paul proclaim, **"The grace of God appeared saving all..."** In Luke's nativity story the angels tell the shepherds: **"Today in the city of David, a Savior has been born for you who are Christ the Lord."** And so, along with the shepherds, we come rejoicing. We come rejoicing along with St. Paul and the angels, who sang to the shepherds that in Jesus, born in Bethlehem, our God has become one of us in our flesh – God has become one with our broken, wounded world.

The evangelist Luke presents us with a very beautiful and touching story of the Nativity. Only the gospels of Matthew and Luke present stories of the birth of Jesus. Matthew's nativity story we always read on the Solemnity of Epiphany, where Magi from the east come to rejoice at the birth of the Messiah. Luke chooses shepherds as the first recipients of **"good news of great joy to be shared by all the people."** Why insignificant shepherds? Why not important wise men or great kings as Matthew chose? What is Luke trying to say with poor, lowly shepherds? At the time of Jesus' birth, shepherds were among the poorest and most marginalized people of Judean society. Being extremely poor and marginalized, shepherds were stereotyped as suspicious and untrustworthy people. In the social economy of things, shepherds just did not count; as a result shepherds were ostracized by the Jewish society and others in the world of Jesus' time.

With shepherds being the first to come to Bethlehem, Luke is reminding us that the newborn Messiah has come to bring justice to the downtrodden of the world. The first to be invited to the table of God's Kingdom are those who are outside looking in now! Luke is reminding us, if we want to be followers of the Babe of Bethlehem, then we must reach outside the boundaries of our hearts, as Jesus does, and do something to lift up the poor and the marginalized in our communities with compassion and justice. This babe of Bethlehem will be the one who tells the story of the rich man and Lazarus. In short, Luke is telling us that God does not exclude anyone from his love. Therefore, we in turn cannot exclude anyone from our embrace of love, absolutely no one.

Perhaps a story will help illustrate the love we should have for each other. The story goes that from a medieval English town Rabbi Isaac, known to be a holy visionary, traveled to the baron's castle to see him and his wife. "I have been given a divine secret and commanded by God to share it with you," he told them. "You may never speak of this again." They agreed. "The secret," said Rabbi Isaac "Is that the messiah is hidden among us. That is all I am permitted to say."

The baron knew that Christ had already come, so this must mean that it is the end time. He had one request: "Please Rabbi, tell the monks of our monastery, for they must hear this great news." The rabbi agreed, and when he met the monks he swore them to secrecy: "The messiah is hidden among us," he repeated, "but you must not speak of this again, even among yourselves, until he chooses to reveal himself."

Now the monastery was not in good shape spiritually. The monks were fond of quarrels, of gossip and striving for authority. "Who is he?" they wondered among themselves. Given the humility of divine love, some thought it was perhaps the strange brother who tended the garden. Others imagined perhaps it was the abbot. It could even be the monk next to them who sang off key day after day. Speculation ran everywhere. So they began to treat each other as though he could be the hidden Messiah. You never know.

The baron and his wife privately wondered too. They wondered about each other, about the stable boy, the village fool... It could be anyone! Not surprisingly, the baron lived quite well while the peasants' lives were little more than hardship. He and his wife sold their tapestries, fine clothes and many sets of dishes. They shared their proceeds with those in most need. They also transformed part of their castle into a hospice to care for those most dangerously ill. Who knows if that peasant they washed and cared for might be the hidden Messiah.

The people of the realm had never experienced such generosity by their lord and lady. They in turn became even more loyal, and they began to treat each other differently. Thefts became unknown, doors remained unlocked, and strangers no longer found suspicion but hospitality.

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News of the monastery got back to the people in town. The brothers never prayed or worked with such love and devotion. They were so happy, so blessed, knowing that the messiah was hidden among them. Some people even said on a dark and clear night, you could see the monastery itself radiate light.

In time the monks aged and died, to be replaced by other young men, some zealous and others less so. The baron and his wife died and were replaced by their children and grandchildren, as was the case with all the townspeople. Rabbi Isaac died and was replaced several times over by other rabbis.

Generations came and went. Bickering returned, and suspicion many times replaced trust. The baron's grandson was not the man his grandfather was. And they all looked back to that time, now many years ago, when it wasn't that way. "Why has all this changed?" they sometimes wondered. "What secret did they know that we do not?"

This is the secret – but you mustn't tell anyone – the messiah is hidden among us. God sent the gift of God's Self to us not with public fanfare or ceremony, but in smallness, weakness, and hiddenness. God comes to us in a small child, homeless and poor, powerless, defenseless, flesh of our flesh, bone of our bone.

What is God teaching us about God in this newborn infant? What are we to learn? The mystery of God becoming human is the implanting of God in the material world once and for all. God consents to share humanity so we can become divine. What God did in and through the life of Jesus of Bethlehem, Nazareth and Calvary, God does in all, over all and through all. (Eph 4:6) The secret? Each one of us is a word of God made flesh. Each of us is the manifestation of the very God we seek and celebrate this evening. Each of us is to pass on the mystery of God enfleshed from generation to generation through the lived experience of our own daily lives.

We are God's hands that touch and heal the lives of the sick. We are God's feet that willingly walk the extra mile for the person in need. We are God's arms that bend down to pick up those who have fallen. We are God's eyes that can see the image of God in all people, and God's voice that speaks peace and justice. We are God's ears that hear the cry of the poor, and God's heart that bears the compassion of the suffering. St. Irenaeus sums up what God is teaching us in the mystery of the Incarnation. "Jesus Christ became what we are in order that we might become what he himself is."

Song: "I Wonder as I Wander"

I wonder as I wander out under the sky,  
How Jesus the Savior did come for to die.  
For poor on'ry people like you and like I...  
I wonder as I wander out under the sky.

When Mary birthed Jesus 'twas in a cow's stall,  
With wise men and farmers and shepherds and all.  
But high from God's heaven a star's light did fall,  
And the promise of ages it then did recall.

If Jesus had wanted for any wee thing,  
A star in the sky, or a bird on the wing,  
Or all of God's angels in heaven for to sing,  
He surely could have it, 'cause he was the King.

I wonder as I wander out under the sky,  
How Jesus the Savior did come for to die.  
For poor on'ry people like you and like I...  
I wonder as I wander out under the sky.