

GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY

REV. ERIC NICOLAI

My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence. I ask your pardon for my sins and the grace to make this time of Christmas fruitful. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel and all the angels, intercede for me.

Well, today's Mass will be taken from St. Luke, the reading- reading from St. Luke says, "To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you. You will find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." Well, I know we've heard these words so often, but these words were said dramatically by a beautiful, beautiful angel enveloped in celestial light of the Divine. It was the most important message that mankind has ever heard. The first ones to hear this incredible message of goodness of the Lord were shepherds. They saw this incredible appearance of God's glory around them and they were given a sign- not some strange, obtuse, and complicated puzzle reserved for the smartest people around; it was a very, very simple sign. It was a baby in a manger in the city of King David, Bethlehem. Nothing miraculous, nothing extraordinary, nothing magnificent is given to the shepherds as a sign. Of course, the angels were magnificent and the light was amazing, but they were just told, you will see a child wrapped in swaddling clothes, one who, like all children, needs a mother's care; a child born in the stable, on top of that, who therefore lies not in a cradle but in a manger. God's sign is the baby in need of help and in poverty.

So, why- why was this a sign? Well, it was in Bethlehem, and in Hebrew, Bethlehem meant *the house of bread*. So, that child had been placed in a manger. A manger is a place to eat, in French we say *mange*, a dish for our animals to eat from. So, he has become the Bread of Life for us to- to go with faith and trust. And only in their hearts will the shepherds be able to see that this child fulfills the promises of the prophet Isaiah which we heard in the first reading where it said, "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and a government will be put upon his shoulders." That is from the prophet Isaiah.

Exactly the same sign has been given to us. We too are invited by the angel of God through the message of the gospel, to set out in our house- in our hearts, to see the child lying in a manger. We really must, you know, let ourselves be blessed. Do you remember the holy eagerness of the patriarchs who- who sighed lovingly for the coming of the Messiah? They dearly desired to see the Messiah: "Blessed be our eyes because we see that many longed to see and never saw," we read. "And

we hear what many yearned to hear and never heard. Blessed are we who have seen God in a baby, the Creator, in swaddling clothes. Blessed are we who have met the Redeemer in a manger. Blessed are we who contemplate Mary holding the salvation in her arms." So, now after all this preparation, we do feel blessed at Christmas. The wait really is over and God is here. That devil trembles now in front of this baby because out of love for you he has come to erase our sins.

So, today is really a day for contemplation, for listening, for singing, and for loving. For some, well it might be a moment in which they're entertained with music and song and dance and, okay, that's good and, of course, the exchange of gifts, but all that joy is really the fruit of something much deeper. St. Josemaria, he described it like this, he said, "Make your way to Bethlehem. Go up to the child, take him in your arms, and dance. Say warm and tender things to him. Press him to your heart. I'm not taking- I'm not talking childish nonsense." He said, "I'm speaking of love, and love is shown with deeds. In the intimacy of your soul, you can indeed hug- hug him tight." This was the way he showed his affection for the Child Jesus and his love for him, holding him in tight- tight. And he used to like picking up the baby Jesus and holding him like that in his arms and cuddling him in Madrid because he would go to the Carmelites there and because they had a very well-sculpted figure of the baby Jesus. I think it was quite old, and it was a popular devotion to it. And- and often, during the Christmas period, he would just go there and basically steal the child. And they kind of said, no problem, just take it, okay, but, you know, bring it back. But- and- and then later on he had a copy made, and he would bless the students of the Roman College in Rome, the students studying there. And later on, Bl. Josemaria- excuse me, Bl. Alvaro del Portillo would do the same thing. And I remember getting blessed by Alvaro del Portillo with that baby Jesus, it's like- it's like a relic. And so, during this Christmas time, we must really try to enter more deeply into the mystery of Mary, Joseph, and, of course, the child and what this mystery really means, how that really bolsters our faith in the true God made man.

Now, one person who did this quite beautifully, thanks to her visions and her life, was St. Bridget of Sweden. You may know she was married for twenty-eight years until her husband died, and she had eight children. And she became part of the Franciscan Tertiaries, and then, in 1349, she left Sweden for good and went on a pilgrimage to Rome, and she made the trek also to Bethlehem. And apparently, in 1372, she had these tremendous visions of Mary and Joseph in the stable. She goes into a detailed description of the scene of Mary removing her sandals and then the veil and then suddenly, she gave birth to the child who was so luminous that he lit up the whole place and- and his body was so pure and no longer in need of the candle that Joseph had brought in. And she wrote in her diary, which I mean, she goes into detailed description of this, you know, but she says, "When she had already born her child," referring to Mary, "she immediately worshipped him and her head bent down and her hands collapsed- clasped with great honor and reverence and said unto him, 'Be

welcomed, my God, my Lord, my son.' When this was done, then Joseph entered, prostrating himself to the floor and he wept for joy. He wept for joy."

This is- basically what Bridget saw Joseph and Mary doing. This description was then used as a model for subsequent paintings of the Nativity, especially showing Mary and Joseph just kneeling there in front of this- this little baby on the ground, luminous, just totally luminous. Not- Mary in this was not reclining and kind of recovering from birth as we've seen in some of the earlier Byzantine icons. She is there kneeling, she adores the child together with Joseph. And you know, we see the- the ox and the ass in the background and stuff.

But- now, what we can ask ourselves in our prayer, does the baby Jesus fill my life with light? And that's what he was doing there in those images, he's just radiating light. Is his presence in my day, in my day to day affairs, like a bold, luminous beacon, a safe lighthouse that clears the way for the- for the setbacks through professional turmoil, health difficulties, the stress of living through the pandemic, or family issues? Jesus, you fill my life with light and meaning. You make all dark moments bright with the luminosity of faith and just simple humility. You give me a sense of overwhelming joy. Now, you are small my Jesus- but I am captivated by the splendor of your divine sweetness. When I get a bit too anxious, when I feel, you know, too antsy, I will kneel down in front of you because, though you are a mute child, you illuminate my life and the very meaning and purpose of my life.

We know, for some, I mean, Christmas has been usurped by Black Friday and consumerism, you know. Let's really re-appropriate the story of Christmas by simply recounting it. Forget the video games and- and just stand by humbly, read the gospel narrative and watch it in the nativity scene, to see it, look at it, stare at the ox and the ass as they fight to see the child better and they warm him with their- with their warm breath. Probably wasn't bad breath, it was good, sweet breath, I hope. You- or you can be a shepherd or you can be one of the wise men who came later. But we go without gadgets for us and we give him our time and our love. But if you and I are there, well, it is because we are like those vigilant shepherds in the fields.

I mean, why did those angels appear to shepherds? They were low in society, dirty, smelly, not- not the most fashionably dressed, but they were keeping watch, they were definitely vigilant. This is what Pope Benedict said a few years ago in 2008 on Christmas Eve. He said, "The shepherds were truly watchful people with a lively sense of God and of his closeness. They were waiting for God and were not resigned to his apparent remoteness from their everyday lives- remoteness from everyday lives." And that could happen to us. We feel- he's out there, you know. So the Pope says, "To- to a watchful heart the news of great joy can be proclaimed; for you this night the Savior is born. Only a watchful heart is able to believe the message. Only a watchful heart can instill the courage to set out

to find God in the form of a baby in a stable. Let us now ask the Lord to help us, help us too to become a watchful people." And this is what he insists on to become a watchful people.

So, it's- it's really to be a watchful people, just another way of saying that we should be a contemplative people to notice things, to truly be men and women of prayer, not missing out on the essentials of our life, when we work, when we're living family life, when we're being kind with others, really capable of listening, and not just now but always in our life, to be watchful people. And that's what- that's what the shepherds were, that's why angels chose them and decided to appear to them. Imagine if they had appeared to the literati of the time, you know, the- the famous people that- who might have questioned all this, and maybe they gave some interviews of what happened, they maybe felt very self-important, and they saw- they thought maybe to record everything on their phones and then they posted it online afterwards. How many views they would get, you know, like, that's- those are not the people that, you know, the angels decided to appear to, no.

Indeed, most of the paintings always show angels in Christmas, and either in the famous Baroque paintings and Christmas cards that you will have gotten or new ornaments on the trees, we'll see lots of angels. We see angels everywhere. And indeed, the angels noticed the watchfulness of those shepherds at that time in history, but who would they have found today? Like, if the Lord came today, are we that watchful? Or, maybe we're more attentive to our screens, or devices, or our worries, or the latest sports- sports results, or the latest political debates. Maybe we're more watchful to the latest podcast. And so, maybe the angels look at us and just shake their heads, and he looks at me, the angels. But, if they were not so pure, they would see, you know, you- we would see in them a compassionate smile, noting how sad- how we sad creatures kind of get entangled in our problems in our short, rather humble lives, or sometimes full of ourselves and persuaded that we are kind of like immortal but the angels, while contemplating the love, in contemplating love day and night, I mean, they're in front of God, right, they only love us and want to help us, that's what the angels want to do. And they tried to say, look up, look up. Look at the goal and the end of your existence, love again and again.

So, well, love is what will remain at the end. And it is all that- that we will see when we review our lives in God's eyes when- in the judgment. Maybe- does this scare us? On the contrary, when we think about it, it is really quite magnificent because if I think about it, you know, my most beautiful moments, the people who mattered most in my life and my loving- loveliest memories are all connected with- with love and vigilance for love. Even our bitterest tears have come to us from love, a love- a lost love, a wounded love, or love that was not shared. So today, let us share some tears of love and think about all those wonderful moments we contemplate the child and- and all the times we did that as children, with the simplicity of children. And I pray that this really be a truly

significant Christmas for you and me as we abandon ourselves to the- to the loving mercy of God who's truly coming close to us during this time of Christmas.

Perhaps you remember that story of all these shepherds, that story, I mean, it's a legend, but anyway, all these stories of the shepherds who came to visit the child and they saw Mary there and Joseph and they were- they were- they saw Mary holding the child in her arms, right. And they all brought gifts to her and to Joseph, one after the other. Joseph took some gifts and then Mary received some, but there was one small shepherd the smallest of them all, he was kind of embarrassed because, well, he didn't bring a single gift, like he just didn't think about it, right. He just rushed- he was like go, let's just go there. And then he saw all these guys, his confreres, like giving all these amazing gifts, like really nice gifts, right, like super nice. Where did they get these? And of course, Mary's receiving them all very kindly saying, nice, thank you very much, thank you, thank you. And- but at one moment- like her arms are so full, like she can't take in more gifts, like it- and then she has the baby, the child Jesus in her other arm, and she looks around and she sees that little shepherd and his hands are empty, his arms are empty. She says, here, you hold him, okay, just hold him for a moment, all right. And then the child- the shepherd finds himself holding the greatest treasure of all, the greatest treasure of all, he couldn't believe it.

So, maybe, truly, our simplicity, our poverty, but especially our spirit of contemplation this Christmas will make it a Christmas full of joy and contemplation. Let us hold him this Christmas too. Merry Christmas to all of you, God bless you.

I thank you, my God, for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations that you have communicated to me in this meditation. I ask your help to put them into effect. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.



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