

[Readings: Is 11:1-10; Ps. 72; Rom 15:4-9; Matt 3:1-12]

Those of you who have been members of this parish for 30 years or more can recall the most favorite hymn of our beloved former pastor, Monsignor John Hall, of happy memory. May he rest in peace. What was that hymn, which we sang often during the Sign of Peace that he loved so much?

“Let There Be Peace on Earth!” And let it begin with me!

Now I freely admit I have no expertise in the realm of music criticism. Still, I roll my eyes at the sentimental lyrics, the un-singable high notes at the end of the song (I have to drop an octave when we get to that part!). But I also get a little misty-eyed by the time we sing the final note, determined that peace can only be engaged with my own personal commitment to it.

Is that it, do you suppose? If we commit to the idea of peace one by one and heart by heart, we will achieve it?

I'm afraid not. It's not just skepticism or world-weariness that compels me to doubt. The prophetic tradition is brilliantly clear on this point: that peace is not possible without the precondition of justice. Peace is not a pleasant state of mind, a soft heart, or an environment of political tolerance. It's not, in other words, a nice idea. If I really mean to let peace begin with me, then I have to begin by dedicating myself to a just world. But you won't likely get a roomful of people to sing a song about justice, because it doesn't have the same sentiments about it that peace does. Justice is hard work, a dirty job. It's also an unpopular goal because so many -- including most of us in church this Sunday -- benefit from systems of injustice directly or indirectly.

The familiar First Reading from Isaiah has been called “The Peaceable Kingdom” and a famous painting has been drawn about it. Isaiah's vision of the Peaceable Kingdom is among the loveliest passages in the Bible. Evoking the harmony of original creation, Isaiah shows us what a peaceful garden the world was meant to be and will be again according to the will of God. Wolves will no longer trouble lambs; calves and lion cubs will keep company. Cows and bears will be neighbors, and snakes will not endanger children.

Our world, rocked by war, terrorism, violence, and prejudice of every kind, knows nothing of such a peace. Whole societies are fueled by racism, national or religious supremacy, or economic disparity. The Christian insistence on the sanctity of every human life -- rich or poor, old or young, mature or unborn, disabled or able-bodied, enemy as well as friend -- makes the cry for justice an imperative among us.

We cannot have the flower of peace without sowing the seed of justice. If we want the horrible headlines to stop, we have to commit ourselves, one by one and heart by heart, to the goal of justice worldwide. We have to shake ourselves loose from all prejudices that lead us to presume that some people don't deserve the good things of life, that some are simply not like us in the eyes of God. It's our willingness to gain at the expense of another's loss that encourages every kind of evil to flourish. There can never be peace in a world where this arrangement is the normal order of business.

Today's Psalm 72 speaks of the coming of a just ruler, the king's son, who will bring a Kingdom of "profound peace" into being. In today's Gospel, John the Baptist calls for a new world order, a straightening out of crooked paths so that the Lord might walk among us. John makes the choice stark and urgent: we choose repentance or the ax, we choose a baptism of water or fire.

The Kingdom is coming soon but it doesn't come cheap. A world where tax collectors cheat and soldiers bully is not a place where justice is. If we want the Prince of Peace to rule us, we must accept the conditions of a just society.

And yes, this means doing the hard, dirty work of smoothing out disparities: renouncing luxuries, sharing with the poor, speaking publicly in defense of unpopular issues like responsible relationships, families found on faith, and each one of us seeing ourselves as having a God-given identity and value. Justice means we consume less so that others may have more; we share more so that others suffer less. It's a simple formula with far-ranging results.

While we wait this Advent for "Jesse's shoot to blossom," we can take the pledge that justice, too, begins with you and me.

Throughout our nation this month, we will be able to say thank you to

those religious men and women who laid the foundation for our life of piety – living as faithful, committed and conscientious Catholics. We will offer our thanks by praying for all retired religious, maybe by sending them a note of thanks, and by sharing our generous support of the Retirement Fund for Religious.

One child describes his religious teachers as “people who knew people, who knew people, who knew Jesus!”

Our best tribute to all retired religious is for you and me to be the same kind of people who think, speak and act as “people who knew people who knew Jesus.” Do I know my Catholic Faith, the teachings and practices of the Church well enough to instruct others? If not, how am I continuing my own faith formation by attending classes, reading and participating in faith-sharing groups, either in person or on line?

Am I praying for and being an authentic Catholic witness to those who do not practice the Catholic Faith, or who no longer practice their Catholic Faith? Am I as engaged as I can be in the life of the Church – at home and in my parish? How can I deepen my faith in Jesus Christ and in His Church?

What member of my family can I encourage with charity and patience to return to the Church? How? Which of my parents, children, siblings or relatives need to feel a special sense of welcome, and how can I give it to them?

Can I share my own story of who has accompanied me on my journey of faith? Am I praying enough for family members to return to the Church?

An angel is defined as a messenger, sent by God, to deliver God’s message, God’s Word, to us. They are trustworthy mentors who can inspire and guide us daily. May we be God’s earthly angels to our families, our parish, our nation, our world. Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me!

Come, Lord, Jesus! AMEN!

[Genesis 3:9-15, 20; Psalm 98; Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12; Luke 1:26-38]

I have heard it said more than once, when a married couple talks about the possibility of the wife being pregnant, the comment is made: "Well it must have been an immaculate conception!" Even my own parents jokingly said this. But they are confusing today's feast of the Immaculate Conception with the Catholic teaching, the "dogma" of the "Virgin Conception" (celebrated on March 25<sup>th</sup>, the Feast of the Annunciation) leading to the "Virgin Birth" of Jesus at Christmas on December 25<sup>th</sup>.

There is no scripture, no bible passage that gives us historical certainty about the mystery we celebrate today: the conception of Mary without any stain of sin in the womb of HER mother, whom tradition calls "Good St. Anne."

Mary had to be a perfect vessel for the reception of the Word Made Flesh, so she was given "prevenient grace" – the grace "before the coming" of Jesus Christ in her womb. Throughout her life, she was tempted, as all humans are tempted, but because of her free will and being "full of grace," she never committed sin. She stands in contrast to Eve, who in our First Reading, along with Adam, commits the two-fold sin of pride and disobedience.

Life has shown me, and my personal journal of faith as shown me, that the key to a deeper spirituality and to a closer relationship with the Lord and His Church is the virtue of humility. Real humility is not putting ourselves down, or thinking of ourselves as worthless, or allowing others to use us as a door mat.

Real humility is thinking about God more than we think of ourselves, and thinking of others before thinking of ourselves. THAT is true humility.

This is what Mary does in today's Gospel. She freely chooses to say "Yes" to the will of God in her life. She freely chooses to say "Yes" to the new life God wants to create in her womb. The three key phrases Mary says in the Gospel of Luke are these: "Let it be done unto me as you say," (at the Annunciation), "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord," (At the Visitation of Mary and Elizabeth on May 31<sup>st</sup>), and my favorite: "Do whatever he tells you." This is said at the Wedding Feast at Cana. It is a good rule of thumb for life!

Can you think of “humbling moments” in your life, where you were knocked down a couple of notches? Many would call them humiliating experiences. Like with our first human parents, they start with pride.

Trust me, I can name dozens, if not hundreds of times when I acted like I was better than someone else, put down someone else, and then within seconds, minutes, or hours, the exact thing was done to me. The Polish expression for this is “Boza Grozy!” or, loosely translated, “God will get you!” Putting it another way, Karma – what goes around, comes around!

That’s the negative way of looking at humility. Pride and ego are humbled by humiliating experiences. Looking at it positively, be open to God’s will in your life. What do we say every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer? “THY will be done.” As St. Paul reminds us, God has given us every spiritual blessing in Heaven, and has destined us to be holy and without blemish – “immaculate” in other words!

The positive way of looking at humility is found in the Prayer of Abandonment by St. Charles de Foucault. I shared this prayer when I first arrived at St. Martin de Porres Parish, and I think it bears repeating. I pray this prayer every morning, before leaving the rectory. Imagine Mary saying this prayer in today’s Gospel:

*Father,*

*I abandon myself into your hands; do with me what you will.*

*Whatever you may do, I thank you: I am ready for all, I accept all.*

*Let only your will be done in me, and in all your creatures –*

*I wish no more than this, O Lord.*

*Into your hands I commend my soul:*

*I offer it to you with all the love of my heart,*

*for I love you, Lord, and so need to give myself,*

*to surrender myself into your hands without reserve,*

*and with boundless confidence, for you are my Father. AMEN!*

O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee. AMEN!

[Readings: Isaiah 35:1-6a, 10; Psalm 146; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11: 2-11]

Whenever St. John the Baptist is referenced in the Gospels, there are two questions asked of him that usually pop up. The first question is: “Are you the one?” which we hear today. The second question is “What are we to do?” It is asked of Jesus by the disciples of John the Baptist in another Gospel. John has done his duty. He has proclaimed the coming of the Messiah. He has told the crowds what they must do to prepare for his coming: to turn away from sin and to prepare their hearts. Now John is in jail. He probably can guess what awaits him. He might be doubting if Jesus is the Christ, the Anointed One of God, and so he asks the question in today’s Gospel: “Are you the one, or should we look for another?” Jesus answers: “Look at the miracles I have performed. Listen to the message I have preached. Let me into your hearts and into your lives.”

As we come to the midway point of our Advent journey, I invite you to ask yourselves those same questions. Do you really believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? Do you really have a personal relationship with Him? And, if so, how are your actions, your attitudes, your speech and your lifestyle reflecting that relationship? “What do you want me to do?” Our Blessed Mother Mary has the ready answer at the wedding feast at Cana: “Do whatever He tells you.” Do what Jesus wants you to do. This is called “discernment.”

Take a look at your own life. What specifically do you still need to do to prepare the way of the Lord? What is Jesus Christ asking of you today? Only YOU can fill in the blank. Be honest. Be brutal. Be specific.

Religious men and women -- priests, brothers and sisters – may have played a role in helping us to answer those questions. They served in our parishes. They taught in our schools. They ministered in our hospitals.

Now, most of them are elderly and in need of our response of generosity. For over twenty years, the Retirement Fund for Religious has been collected to help these religious men and women in their later years. What does the Lord want us to do? Easy: to pray for them, to thank them and to help them financially. Please give as you prayerfully discern it. In their name, I thank you!

Back to discernment. In other words, when we ask Jesus, “Are YOU the One? What are we to do? What do you want ME to do for YOU?”

The word “discernment” means to invite the Holy Spirit, God’s Word and God’s Holy Church to help us to prayerfully figure out the answer to life’s questions, to figure out the answer to what God wants us to do with our lives, and to figure out how to do it! A Pew study concludes that 70% of people aged 18 to 35 do not believe in any organized religion, and do not participate in church activities. I wonder if they are asking the same questions that we are!

Put simply, discernment is the process whereby we attempt to decide what is right or wrong, good or bad, true or false. Often, discernment centers on a particular event, a way of acting or a decision to be made. This can be as simple as helping a child see why it is wrong to lie, to grappling with a complicated moral or ethical matter. Regardless, it focuses on helping someone discern how the Holy Spirit is leading you and me.

In these last two weeks of Advent, as we hit the home stretch of the coming of the Lord, I again invite you and challenge you to take an honest look at your own life.

In Sacred Scripture, deserts can be places of wandering and danger but also places of closeness to God.

What are the “deserts” in your life? The hazardous places? Where do you go and what do you do to find closeness with God?

“Strengthen the hands that are feeble, make firm the knees that are weak,” says Isaiah. Where do you need strengthening? Where do you go for strength?

The Letter of James counsels patience. What do you have to be patient about? How does God help you to have a firm heart?

What specifically do you still need to do to prepare the way of the Lord? What is Jesus Christ asking of you today? Only YOU can fill in the blank. Be honest. Be brutal. Be specific. AMEN!

Mass Prayers: #38 For the Forgiveness of Sins B (Page 1151)

Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation #1, Solemn Blessing Ordinary Time #13

Readings: from TUESDAY of the Third Week of Advent (NOT Wednesday)

Zep. 3: 1-2, 9-13; Psalm 51, Matt. 21:28-32

### **Homily/Reflection**

Where are we heading – as a church, as a nation, as a state? The two most famous 21st Century Saints – St. Pope John Paul II and St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta probably enjoy the status of any superstar or celebrity. I had the blessing of seeing them both in person, and even shook the pope's hand a couple of times. I bowed humbly to Mother Teresa without human contact. What I remember most of both of them was what they said when it comes to life issues. Pope St. John Paul II said this: "As goes the family, so goes the nation. As goes the nation, so goes the world." St. Mother Teresa says something similar: "God will judge all nations by how they treat their most vulnerable – their very young and their very old." The unborn and the ill elderly. Abortion and Euthanasia.

Let's make an accounting of what direction we are going. Marriage and family life are the keystones of society and of civilization itself. Destroy either one of those, and you destroy the basic cells of humanity. The Judeo-Christian foundation of our civilization and of our country is eroding. Laws, rules and behaviors once based on Natural Law and on God's Law now are called biased, prejudiced and promoting hate. What is being promoted in their place has caused division, destruction and harm to individuals, couples and groups.

I've been here for 8 ½ years as pastor of St. Martin de Porres Parish, and I don't remember receiving an angry email or voicemail message until our campaign to defeat Proposal 3. We put up lawn signs and banners on our exterior church walls urging people to Vote NO on proposal 3. This caused an anonymous email threatening legal action and the loss of our tax-exempt status. Our response was putting on our church marquee a message that simply said this: "What is popular is not always right. What is right is not always popular."



The Readings for tonight's Mass are taken from yesterday's Mass for Tuesday of the Third Week of Advent. These readings speak more of what we are doing here tonight. From our First Reading from the Prophet Zephaniah:

*Woe to the city, rebellious and polluted, to the tyrannical city!*

*She hears no voice, accepts no correction; in the Lord she has not trusted,*

*To her God, she has not drawn near.*

But God does not leave us to wallow in our moral errors and mistakes:

*On that day, you need not be ashamed of all your deeds, for your rebellious actions against me.*

*But I will leave as a remnant in your midst a people humble and lowly.*

I couldn't help thinking this election year of how our political process manipulated "We the People" with misinformation, mud-slinging ads and downright lies. I also had to think that with regard to Proposal 3, there were among us Christians and Catholics who advocated for its passage and voted that way, giving it the majority vote. Those folks and we are like those two sons in tonight's Gospel: Saying to their father one thing, and then going out and doing another. I profess faith in the teachings of the Church, but I voted YES anyway. I oppose some of the teachings of the Church, but I voted NO anyway. Then I think of our Responsorial Psalm 51: "Be merciful O, Lord for we have sinned." All of us have sinned in one way or another. That is why we are here tonight.

At a Presidential Convention many decades ago, President Ronald Reagan once referred to "the Silent Majority." That would be US. But, like that "Holy Remnant," we can be silent no longer. We will pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and continue the fight for the Right to Life. Let us remember these words spoken forty-two years ago at another Presidential Convention and apply them to our struggle: "For all those whose cares have been our concern, the work goes on, the cause endures, the hope still lives and the dream shall never die." AMEN!

### **Mass of Reparation -- Universal Prayer of the Faithful**

Be merciful, O Lord, be merciful, O Lord, be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.  
Hear our cries of sorrow, and answer our pleas.

1. In reparation for all the sins of our society, especially those against human life and dignity, sexual morality and religious freedom, we pray to the Lord.
2. That the prayers, sacrifices and faithful witness of committed Catholics and other Christians will help transform our culture of death into a society that truly respects and defends God's gift of life, we pray to the Lord.
3. For all victims of violence, hatred and injustice, and for an end to warfare, terrorism, crime, sexual and physical abuse, religious persecution, and every other violation of human dignity and freedom, we pray to the Lord.
4. That all those who have resisted the call to repentance and conversion may entrust themselves to the mercy of the Heavenly Father, we pray to the Lord.
5. For the continued spread of the Gospel throughout the world, for Christian Unity and for respect for all people of faith, we pray to the Lord.
6. For the Holy Father, for our Archbishop, and for all leaders and members of the Church, that they will faithfully and lovingly fulfill their spiritual and religious duties, and inspire others to hear and accept the Gospel, we pray to the Lord.
7. For mercy on those who worked for and voted for the passage of Proposal 3, and for all those whose lives will be negatively impacted or terminated by the passage of this Proposal, we pray to the Lord.
8. For all those who have asked for our prayers, for all those in need of our prayers, and for all of our loved ones who have died, we pray to the Lord.
9. For all the special intentions we mention now in the silence of our hearts [Pause], we pray to the Lord.

Hear, O Lord, these, our prayers. Grant all this, if it is according to your will, through Christ our Lord and in your Holy Spirit, and through the powerful intercession of Mary, the Mother of all that is good, true and lovely. AMEN!

[Readings: I Cor. 1:3-9; Psalm 130; Matt. 10-13]

We are in the home stretch! Only nine more days until Christmas, which translates into eight more shopping days!

But tonight we take a break from the holiday hubbub. We pause for one night from the traffic and the noise and the distractions.

One of my favorite New Testament passages is from St. Paul. St. Paul writes in his Letter to the Philippians, Chapter 4 verse 8: “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable -- if anything is excellent or praiseworthy -- think about such things.”

Tonight, we reflect on these things: along with truth, beauty and goodness, and how we have fallen short of these divine gifts. We recall what we have been called to be and to do, and ask God for Divine Forgiveness in “missing the mark,” for performing “below the bar.” For failing to be the best versions of ourselves to others.

And so, we come to the Divine Physician, Jesus Christ, who shows us mercy and brings us back to spiritual health. He gives us back the “spiritual gifts” we need as we await His final “revelation.” We give thanks for the grace of God bestowed on us all.

In the Confession of our sins, in our prayer of penitence, we are reminded of what is true. The ugliness of our sins and our stained souls are wiped clean. We are beautiful once more. We are restored to the Original Goodness with which our first ancestors were created. THAT is the best Christmas gift ever! Come, Lord Jesus! AMEN!

[Readings: Isaiah 7:10-14; Psalm 24; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-24]

When I began taking different progressive medicine for the various medical maladies I have inherited over the past ten to fifteen years, the instructions that came with it carried the explanation about why I am taking it, what it will do, and what the possible side effects might be. As usual, as when you listen to TV commercials about prescription medications, the list of side-effects seems almost as bad as the illness itself.

Do you want pain relief or do you want a stomachache? Do you want the itching to stop, or do you want to lose a layer of your skin? I was very startled and surprised to find out that the anti-inflammation medication for my neuropathy in my feet, legs and hands is also prescribed by doctors as an anti-depressant. So, even if I do have pain, hey, I don't care! I'm feelin' GREAT! Another side effect of this medication is "strange dreams." BOY do I get those once in a while!

Psychologists tell us that dreams are just our mind's way of filtering, recycling and retrofitting what happens on our conscious level during the day. But dreams are significant in the Scriptures. In the Catholic tradition, we do hear that dreams are a way that God can communicate with us, as God does with Joseph. We often forget about poor Joseph. Every year, we tend to focus on the story of Mary. But this year, it's Joseph. That's why I try to choose the image of St. Joseph with Mary and Jesus for the cover of the Christmas edition of the bulletin. Now, if the angel can appear to Mary, and then appear to Joseph, there's a lesson in that. That means that the angel can appear to you and me, too. In the Bible, the Annunciation does not occur only once, but twice -- not just to a woman, but also to a man.

God doesn't appear as a ghost, as happens with Ebenezer Scrooge in "A Christmas Carol." No, God appears to Joseph as an angel, and speaks in a language and with words which Joseph understands. "Don't be afraid." "Jeshuah, Joshua, Jesus: God saves." "Emmanuel: God is with us." Joseph would hear these words in the Hebrew oral and written tradition of his ancestors.

God IS with us, and God is calling us to something greater than we can imagine. St. Paul says that we are “called to belong to Jesus Christ.” We are “called to be holy” – called to take that which is human in us and make it divine.

Ahaz in today’s First Reading, originally refuses to acknowledge and accept anything God had spoken through Isaiah, so Isaiah thinks that Ahaz has given up on God. That’s why Isaiah says, “my” God instead of “your” God or “our God.” Ahaz is not being terribly sincere here. Like Ahaz, most of us DO want some sort of sign or indication that God IS calling us. We want to see or hear or feel something that lets us know that God is around. Bottom line: Ahaz doesn’t trust Isaiah.

Maybe God is calling us in our dreams. Maybe God is calling us through the words of the Bible you hear today. Maybe you will realize that GOD IS WITH US when you come up to receive Holy Communion and realize what it truly is for the first time. Take an extra second or two when you come up to receive Holy Communion to think about and to realize what you are doing and Whom you are receiving: God with us.

The Bible carries an implicit message that God does appear over and over again, to various sorts of folks. Matthew and Luke both have it right, but they are telling the same story from a different perspective. God continues to come into the world, but sometimes we have to trust other sources as well!

A possible Christmas gift this year is to believe in someone's dreams, even our own. Not the dreams that come to us during our sleep at night, but the dreams we have during the day: what we want to be when we grow up. What we would like to do to better ourselves or the world around us. What we would like to do say to the world in a message of hope, trust and service.

As a Christian believer and as a practicing Catholic, where do you see yourself in your faith journey next year, five years from now, ten years from now?

Another possible Christmas gift is to see where we can welcome others, how we can accompany others in their search for faith, for hope, for love. To help them and us discern what God wants them and us to do with our lives.

During these last Advent days, we pray that when we leave here during

these final days of preparation for Christmas, we can be light in the mounting darkness of evil and sin in the world, pointing others to the light by our acts of kindness and our words of peace.

This year, make your Nativity set the centerpiece of your Christmas decorations. Show your family and show visitors to your home what is most important about Christmas.

The American poet Maya Angelou once said that you can tell a lot about a person by how they handle three things: a rainy day, lost luggage and tangled Christmas lights! As Advent draws to a close, promise yourself to keep your dreams alive, even when life is dreary, when hope seems lost, and when untangling the messes in your life seems impossible.

We are never too old to dream. We are never too young to learn. Make Jesus Christ a part of that dream. Make His Church the place where you learn. God is with us! And God will come to save us from our sins! Come, Lord Jesus!  
AMEN!

[Isaiah 62: 1-5, Acts 13: 16-17, 22-25 / Isaiah 9:1-6; Titus 2:11-14 /  
Isaiah 62: 11-12, Titus 3: 4-7 / Isaiah 52: 7-10, Hebrews 1: 1-6, Luke  
2:1-14]

Merry Christmas! Welcome to all who join us tonight/today:  
parishioners, relatives and family members; to those who join us from  
other parishes, especially from our Family of Parishes; to students  
and military and former parishioners who have “come home for  
Christmas,” and to those who are searching for a spiritual home.  
“May you find all you need in this room.”

Wally was big for his age -- seven years old. Everyone  
wondered what role the teacher would give him in the annual  
Christmas play. Especially considering the fact that he was also a  
slow learner. To everyone's surprise the teacher gave Wally the role  
of the innkeeper. The boy of course was delighted. After all, all he  
had to learn was one line: "There is no room in the inn." He had that  
down in no time. Then came the night for the program. Mary and  
Joseph entered the stage and walked up to the inn. "Please sir, my  
wife is not well. Could we have a room for the night?" Wally was  
ready for his line. He had rehearsed it all night. He began, "there is",  
and he hesitated. He started over again. "There is..." and again his  
mind went completely blank.

Everyone was embarrassed for him, but poor Wally just didn't  
know what to do. Joseph thought he would improvise and started  
walking away toward the stable on stage left. Seeing him walking  
away Wally in desperation called out: "Look, there's plenty of room at  
my house, just come on home with me."

Is there room for Jesus Christ in your life? This is my Christmas question for you. “Will there ever be any room for Jesus Christ? In our hearts, in our families, in our workplaces, in our schools, in this country, and in the world?”

There was no room for Jesus in the economic world. There was no room for Jesus in the legal realm. There was no room for Jesus even in the realm of the religious order of his time. There was no room for Jesus in the world of politics. Is there room for Jesus Christ in us and within us? That’s the meaning of Christmas! Can the Word become flesh in you and in me?

We have the choice to respond, to step into joy long after the Christmas decorations have returned to the attic for the year. Christ himself, Love Incarnate, gives us the model: Go out of yourself and encounter the other. Make a gift of yourself, and, at the same time, be ready to receive the gift of the other.

While Christmas is full of joy and celebration, the world is not exempt from sorrow during this season. For many of us, our hurting hearts experience intensified ache as memories flood our minds. Perhaps the memory is of a loved one now gone from us. Maybe the memory that haunts us is part of a painful past; something we wish could be changed or undone. Pain not only exists from the past, but in the daily present. Discouragement doesn’t stop lurking. Disease doesn’t stop waging its war. Death doesn’t pause for a few days.

No matter what is causing your hurt, allow yourself the opportunity to recognize the struggle you feel during the holiday season. The point is this: Jesus wasn’t born into ideal circumstances. Despite the stable which most of us would deem



unsuitable accommodations, the Light of the World made His grand entrance in the form of a little baby. Human flesh held the Son of God and the glory of the night could not be contained. Angels sang their glory to God and hope, true Hope for the world was born!

Regardless of the trials you face during the Christmas season, the gift you need the most is the One who longs to live in your heart. No matter the ache or the longing, the sorrow or the suffering, the birth of Jesus brought hope and healing to the entire world.

Today I invite you to look back on your own life, at the things that have happened in your own life: beautiful things, amazing things, incredible things that have happened in your life, maybe ordinary everyday things -- but ordinary everyday things can be beautiful, incredible, and amazing.

St. Paul writes in his Letter to the Philippians, Chapter 4 verse 8: "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable -- if anything is excellent or praiseworthy -- think about such things."

Show of hands – How many of you are between the ages of 18 and 35? I am watching you! I am praying for you to "Come to the Stable!" Is there room for Jesus in the Inn of your hearts and in the Inn of your lives? Will you bring him home to live in you 24/7?

I would like to close with, "Lay It in the Manger" written by Lisa Englehardt:

Your heart, your life, your very self, your humble offering...

Come to the Stable and lay it in the manger which holds the Infant King.

Your prayer for peace on earth, that war and hate might cease

    Come to the Stable and lay it in the manger where sleeps the  
Prince of Peace.

    Any ache or anguish, your spirit's darkest night...

    Come to the Stable and lay it in the manger where lays the Lord of  
Light.

    New heaven and a new earth, God and man are once more  
reconciled...

For laying in the manger is God's Son, the Savior Child.

    Come to the stable. Let Jesus make this a Merry Christmas.

    For this, we can celebrate with Faith, with Hope, with Love and  
with JOY! Because Christmas, in fact, is not just a finite season of  
joy that comes and goes in two brief weeks. Christmas is the place  
where unending joy becomes possible for all of us. AMEN!