

**Homily for Christmas**  
**December 25, 2022**  
**St. Bavo Parish**  
**Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.**

**Midnight Mass readings:**

*First Reading: Isaiah 9:1-6 (The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.)*

*Responsory: Psalm 96 (Today is born our Savior, Christ the Lord.)*

*Second Reading: Titus 2:11-14 (The grace of God has appeared, saving all.)*

*Gospel: Luke 2:1-14 (The birth of Jesus.)*

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone.” What inspiring and hope-filled words for us today! The past few years seem to be filled with darkness and gloom. There’s the COVID-19 pandemic and all of the social upheaval that it has caused, in addition to millions of deaths and serious illnesses. There’s the war in Ukraine, causing needless death and destruction in that country, but also causing food shortages and inflation spikes in other parts of the world. And, let’s not forget the natural disasters that are becoming frequent events, due to climate change.

Still, these modern problems are *nothing* compared to the existential crisis that Isaiah and his people were facing. The darkness in Isaiah’s prophecy probably referred to the terrible plight of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, which at that time was under mortal threat from an unstoppable and utterly ruthless enemy – the Assyrian Empire. Isaiah offered hope that a new King of Judah, born of the Davidic line, would put an end to the bloodshed and conflict, unite all of the Jewish people once again, and bring about a new reign of peace and justice, which would last forever. This great victory would not be accomplished by force of arms, but by *Divine Providence*. “The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this!” shouts the Prophet.

Sadly, no such king arose to fulfill the prophecy during Isaiah’s lifetime. Instead, the gloom only grew darker, with the Northern Kingdom falling to the Assyrians and the Southern Kingdom later falling to an even more powerful adversary. However, the prophecy *would be fulfilled* centuries later, according to God’s mysterious plan. The child to be born, the son given to us, upon whose shoulder dominion rests, *was* coming into the world. He would belong to the House of David, as prophesied, but he would not be the son of a king, born into a life of luxury. Rather, he would be the son of a *carpenter*, born into poverty. His dominion would be vast and forever peaceful, but *not of this earth*. The zeal of the Lord of hosts would do all of this, but not in a way that anyone expected.

When Jesus came into the world, he dispelled a gloom that had hung over the human race since its origin. It was a darkness inherent to the human condition itself – not the threat of a foreign army, or a deadly pandemic, or irreversible climate change, but the absolute certainty of our own mortality. Up until the time of Jesus, all the peoples of the earth lived under a sentence of death. But, God found a way to remove that yoke from our shoulders and free us from eternal darkness. He sent us a *light*, a Savior, who is “Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace.”

*How*, exactly, Jesus came into the world is a matter of much scholarly debate. We have no birth certificate to attest to the exact date and location. No one took a selfie with Jesus and posted it on Instagram. All we have is one account, from the Gospel of Luke. Matthew corroborates Luke's testimony about the Holy Spirit overshadowing Mary, enabling her to conceive the Son of God while remaining a virgin. But, Matthew says nothing about the birth itself, except that it happened, and that Joseph dutifully gave his son the symbolic name *Jesus*, which means, "God saves."

Luke provides a rich narrative, but many of the details seem highly implausible. For example, why would Joseph put Mary and her unborn child at risk by taking them on a long, hazardous journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem? And, if angels went about singing the praises of the newborn King, why was Jesus completely unknown when he began his public ministry about 30 years later? It seems very likely that much of Luke's narrative is *not* based on historical facts. But, if that is so, then all the little details become even *more* important, because we know that Luke included them in the story not just to maintain historical accuracy, but to convey a *theological message*.

The image that Luke has seared into the imagination of every single Christian is that of a Savior born into abject poverty – the Son of God lying in a *feeding trough*, surrounded by filth, and adored by a smelly bunch of shepherds who had just come in from the fields. To call this scene "undignified" would be a gross understatement, especially considering who this child was. Surely, Jesus, of all people, deserved better. He deserved to be born in a royal palace and laid in a golden crib. On the other hand, Luke's humble account of the Lord's birth fits very well with the Jesus whom we meet in all four of the gospels – the itinerant rabbi who identified with the "least of [his] brothers and sisters," and showed deep compassion for those on the margins of society. Though he was never intimidated by the rich and the powerful, Jesus always seemed more at home with the poor and the humble. Luke's Nativity scene shows us a Messiah for *all* of God's people, a Divine Person who emptied himself so completely that he not only took on human flesh, but also entered our world at the lowest rung of society. Not even the lowly shepherds would have felt unworthy in his presence. In fact, according to the story, the shepherds were the *first ones* to hear the Good News of the Savior's birth. So, maybe it doesn't matter whether our traditional manger scene is historically accurate or not. What matters is that it paints a *true picture of who Jesus is*.

St. Paul, in his Letter to Titus, emphasizes that "the grace of God has appeared, saving *all*." Luke would certainly agree. However, Paul also reminds us that the same grace of God which was manifested in the birth of Christ continues to work in us *today*. He says that it "train[s] us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age, as we await the blessed hope, the appearance of the glory of our great God and savior Jesus Christ." In other words, Christ came *first* as a helpless baby, and he will come *again* in power and glory, but *in the meantime*, he remains present with us *every day*, teaching us how to live as citizens of his kingdom of justice and peace. In the words of the Prophet Isaiah, he is our light shining in the darkness and the hope which dispels our gloom; he brings us "abundant joy and great rejoicing." This is what we Christians celebrate at Christmas... and on *every other day of the year*, as well.