



GLORY
TO GOD
IN THE
HIGHEST
AND ON
EARTH
PEACE TO
THOSE
ON WHOM
HIS FAVOR
RESTS.

LUKE 2:14

Our Mother of Sorrows
St. Michael's
CHRISTMAS 2020

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, Praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace and good will toward all." Luke 2:13-14

Christmas Reflections 2020

Hello Everyone!! Merry Christmas to all of you. Thank you for joining me in this little reflection. I want to share some thoughts with you in this most remarkable Christmas 2020. For all of us it will be a Christmas to remember, or maybe one to forget. But, either way, one that will be very important for us because it just might change our lives in very significant ways. Things may never be the same after Christmas 2020.

Maybe this is the closest we will all get to what it was like that first Christmas long ago. Not the cave, the hay, and the long journey on foot, but weren't the lives of Mary & Joseph changed forever because of what happened in that first Christmas a long time ago? Weren't their lives turned upside down? And, not just what happened externally with the birth of Jesus, but what happened internally in their hearts and minds. I'm sure Mary & Joseph knew something remarkable was happening. But, at the same time, abandoning all self-trust, and in a way you and I can only imagine, they relied completely on this amazing — and I think often silent — God who was urging them onward. Not knowing where all this was going to take them, theirs was a life-long journey of radical trust.

Will Christmas 2020 take us closer to this child-like surrender of Mary & Joseph? Will our lives be changed forever, never to be the same again? What are we being called to this Christmas that makes this Christmas so special? If Mary & Joseph had their own unique journey of Faith, what is ours here in 2020? If Mary & Joseph were called to a new adventure, what is the new quest we are being called to begin?

Yes, our spiritual journey, our adventure of faith — like Joseph and Mary — will take us to new places. This entire year has been a journey that has taken us to new places! In so many ways, the pandemic has hit us really hard and has splattered us to the four winds. Our comfort zones have been practically shattered, and we've faced levels of uncertainty and anxiety that we've never faced before. And perhaps most devastating of all, it's been nearly impossible to gather together and walk with each other along this path of challenges and struggles. And yet, something new is happening in our very midst.

Back in 2014 we began a journey with the motto "Jesus, Ignite me." It was a special time, an exciting time. And I believe that what we experienced then — and continue to experience now — is that Jesus really did ignite us. Alpha. Small Groups. Hospitality. Prayer Ministry. Youth Ministry. Music Ministry. Outreach. But, most of all, Jesus has ignited us by giving us the gift of friendship. Since then, many of you have made such wonderful friendships. Friendships made during the Alpha Course, friendships made in our many Small Groups, friendships made in our various ministries. Important friendships. Friends working together to advance the Kingdom. Before that, many of us journeyed alone, but now in many special ways we journey together.

And here is where I am most encouraged. Despite the uncertainties of this year — despite the pandemic and the challenges and restrictions and difficulties it has brought — these friendships have continued. In fact, our parishes of Our Mother of Sorrows and St. Michael's have only become more intentional in creating community. The Alpha Course has launched online; Small Groups meet via Zoom; the various ministries have continued and even grown during this time without sacrificing safety or any of the friendships built along the way. And, we ourselves have grown in how we create community: we make an

attempt to stay connected with our live-streaming, our Facebook Live discussions, our daily Liturgy of the Word on YouTube, and reflections such as these. I believe that this year has shown us what we are capable of and that we, like Mary and Joseph so many years ago, are being called to something new: to become even more intentional about creating community.

More than ever, the Church must be a community where all are welcomed, and all can belong. It is becoming more and more clear to me that the most pressing need in our world is the need to address loneliness, the need to welcome all to belong in community. This sense of belonging can heal broken hearts; it can inspire hope; it can reach into the depths of the heart and shine light where there was only darkness. And so, I would like to invite all of us to once again to re-commit, to re-connect ourselves to be the Church here in Westmont and Brownstown — to be the People of God and a community rich in friendship — and, in new ways, to welcome all.

I know sometimes we can be disappointed in the Church because we see all kinds of people here. Some in the Church we would never pick as our friends. Some with views that are ideologically different from our own. But if we are looking for emotional and ideological compatibility, we missed the point of the Church. To be the Church is not only to stand with people different from ourselves, but to stand shoulder to shoulder with them — different that we are — because we all seek Jesus, we all share a common Creed, we all long to hear His Word, we all want to experience Him in the Breaking of the Bread. We all want this loving personal relationship with Jesus, to be loved and accepted by Him, so he can transform our lives into something new. We all want to bridge our differences and become a common heart.

Jesus' early disciples were a very diverse group — to say the least!! Before they met Jesus, they would never even be seen in the same room together! There were Zealots who wanted to overthrow Rome and tax collectors who made a living by cooperating with the Roman occupation. There were those who were raised Pharisees and those were raised Sadducees. There were fishermen, prostitutes, saints, sinners, and people like you and me. But, because of Jesus, they became friends — brothers and sisters. Though they began as ideologically different, because of Jesus and filled with the Spirit, they were willing to die for one another.

You see, Church is not a few like-minded people but different kinds of people transcending their differences so as to become a community, a beacon of Christian Life, welcoming all, igniting all to be intentional disciples of Jesus — regardless of temperament, ideology, language, political persuasion or background. Like the early disciples who became the Church of Jesus Christ and went on to change their world, we too are called to be the Church in our world and go out to create intentional community and to welcome all.

So, before we can be the Church of Jesus Christ, we need to be a welcoming community first. You know, in my 30 some years as a priest I think my deepest regrets, my greatest failures have been around my failure to welcome. And, I feel particularly sad about that because I know that one must feel welcomed, they must feel that they belong before they truly believe. Not just believe certain articles of the Faith, but trust, believe and risk a personal relationship with Jesus. And, I also know that when we “feel” like we belong, and when we truly believe, its then and only then that we behave, we seek to live as intentional disciples of Jesus. So, we first must be a welcoming community, me being a welcoming pastor — everything depends on that initial encounter with all of us.

And so, I wish this Christmas that we all — given all that has happened this past year — once again, each and every one of us, seek to be that Church of Jesus Christ, the Church

that welcomes, the Church that creates intentional community, the Church that goes out to all the world and proclaims the Good News that you belong here. As he did to Mary & Joseph, may Jesus turn our lives upside down and ignite us once again. To make his vision of our parishes our vision. To heal any and all division, to make us once again see each other as brothers and sisters in Christ – Friends!

As I began to write this reflection there has been a story running through my mind that just might capture what I am trying to share with you. You have heard this story before, but it is worth hearing again.

The story is called the Christmas Truce of 1914. It took place on the bloody battlefields of WW I, which had already become a long line of trenches in Flanders and France. Between those trenches was a narrow strip called “no-man’s land,” filled with unburied corpses of soldiers killed trying to storm the opposing trenches. (I often wondered what they would do once they got to the enemy’s trenches?) “No-man’s land” was often no more than 70, 50, 30 yards in width. Anyway, by December 24, 1914 both the Brits and the German soldiers had received a good number of Christmas care packages. The German soldiers even had little Christmas trees, and they would place the Christmas trees, decorated with candles up above the trenches. Then they would sing Christmas carols. The British troops in the opposite trenches took a few pot shots at the trees at first, but then they started listening to the carols and giving a round of applause after each one.

Soon the German soldiers started holding up signs calling for a truce. “You no fight, we no fight.” The British units held up signs in response, “Merry Christmas.” By Christmas morning, whole miles of no-man’s land were filled with fraternizing soldiers from both sides: laughing, singing, exchanging gifts, addresses, and postcards and finally they were able to bury their dead. Some soldiers who were barbers began giving haircuts! One German soldier who was a juggler put on a show. Some units organized soccer games with helmets set on the ground for the goals.

So, what’s my point? When we place Jesus at the center of our lives, yes, even enemies can become friends. When God is present, we can remember that what unites us is infinitely greater than what divides us. When we come to know that we truly belong here, we can open ourselves up to the grace that allows us to give up sinning and we can seek to follow Jesus in friendship with one another. Just like He did so many years ago at that first Christmas with Mary and Joseph, Jesus can turn any world upside down if we let Him and bring His peace. His love and grace make all the difference in the world.

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace and good will toward all.”

Let us build a house where all can dwell and all can safely live,

A place where saints and children tell how hearts learn to forgive.

Built of hopes and dreams and visions, rock of faith and vault of grace.

Here the love of Christ can end divisions:

All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.