

Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament
Christmas Eve 2013 – Midnight Mass
Homily

The famous detective Sherlock Holmes and his friend Dr. Watson went on a camping trip. They set up their tent and after it became dark they went to sleep.

Some hours later, Holmes woke up his faithful friend and said, "Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see."

Watson replied, "I see millions of stars."

"What does that tell you?" asked Holmes

Watson pondered for a minute and then he said:

- "Astronomically speaking, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets.
- Horologically, it appears to be approximately a quarter past three in the morning.
- Meteorologically, it tells us that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. "

Then after a pause, Dr. Watson said: "Well, Holmes, when you look up and see the stars what does it tell you?"

Those who have seen the old Sherlock Holmes mystery movies are familiar with an expression that Sherlock Holmes would often use in response to Watson's questions; so he said in reply,

"It's elementary my dear Watson, someone has stolen our tent!"

I thought of that story when I was reflecting on the first lines from tonight's reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah who says, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light and upon those who dwelt in a land of gloom a light has shone."

There is a similar contrast between darkness and light in Luke's Gospel when he describes the shepherds who were staying up at night to watch over their sheep. But then the sky was lit up with the glory of the Lord when an angel appeared and told them the Good News about the birth of the Savior.

During the past few weeks, people everywhere have shared with me how much they have been looking forward to Christmas. They were telling me how much they wanted the lights, the songs, and the joy that comes with this holy celebration.

And the reasons for wanting the lights, the songs, and the joy of Christmas are universal. People often share with me whatever shades of darkness that they have been experiencing in their lives:

- the illness of a daughter,
- the death of a spouse after more than 50 years of married life,
- an injury that prevents a high school athlete from being in the game with his or her team,
- the struggle to pay bills for a single mom, or
- the loss of a job for a husband and father who not only worries about his financial problems but also feels like part of his dignity has been taken away,
- and the list goes on.

There is a temptation to look for a sign of hope simply in the lights, the songs, and the superficial excitement of Christmas and everything that we do to prepare for it.

We can be like the learned Dr. Watson who looked up at the night sky and got carried away with a recitation of all the splendor that came from the brightness of the stars.

But even Dr. Watson received a reality check from his good friend Sherlock Holmes when he gave his answer to the question, "When you look up at the sky, what do you see?" Sherlock Holmes said the answer is elementary and obvious: "Someone has stolen our tent!"

It's understandable why we want to find a substitute for the complexities of life.

But in the end, it doesn't take long to figure out that a superficial dose of sparkling lights and Christmas songs doesn't do much to clarify and help us deal with the complexities of daily life.

That's where the Gospel becomes so important and so meaningful. The Good News of Christmas is what the angel said to the shepherds who were in the dark and started to see the light of heaven shining into their world.

The angel told them, "Do not be afraid because a Savior has been born for you who is Christ the Lord."

Many people when they hear those words tell me, "But what's the Good News for me? There is still sickness and death and war and violence and unemployment and all these problems in my life and in the world."

The answer is sort of like the conversation between Sherlock Holmes and his good friend. Dr. Watson got caught up in his joy and excitement that was up in the sky. Sherlock Holmes brought his attention back down to earth.

That is the essential mystery that the angel points out in the Gospel. He brings our attention back down to earth because that is where we are to find the true hope and glory of Christmas. The angel said, "This will be the sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger."

What that means is that every time you and I start looking for the Savior that Isaiah foretold, we should start the search right in the circumstances of our lives, no matter how ordinary, or difficult, or complicated.

Jesus Christ, who is Son of God and Son of Mary, was born in a stable surrounded by animals. His first bed was a manger; a feeding trough for the animals. And if things could not be any worse, Joseph and Mary could not return home to Nazareth. Instead, they had to flee into Egypt.

So this great light who is Christ the Lord, he knows what darkness is all about. This beautiful baby in swaddling clothes knows what its like to be homeless, to experience hunger, and suffering, and even death.

But by the grace of God that entered our world in the person of the Lord Jesus, we find another way to see. Instead of just darkness, we can see light.

If you are still trying to figure that one out and how it applies today, I would suggest that you pay attention to what has happened this year when Pope Francis appeared on the scene.

People constantly tell me how they see Pope Francis bring joy and hope to people and they are trying to figure out how it happens. The truth is simple.

His own appreciation of the light of faith and the joy of the Gospel has captured the attention of people all over the world. Pope Francis doesn't ignore all of the situations that all of us experience, whether its sickness, or death, or poverty, or hunger, or unemployment, or the sadness of defeat when we are not on the winning team.

Instead, Pope Francis constantly reminds us that those situations and experiences are opportunities for us to find God's love and share God's love with everyone around us.

Our Holy Father brings the light of faith and the joy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all these situations and he reminds us that if we want to find that light and that joy, we need to step into the tough situations and help someone else through it.

There is a guaranteed blessing that comes from putting our faith into action. As part of the first Christmas hymn ever sung, we hear the words in the Gospel tonight, the angels sang, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

God's favor, God's peace, and God's glory enters our hearts whenever we help another person through the darkness, the suffering, the challenges, that he or she experiences, no matter how big or small.

I hear it all the time and it's no wonder why the news media cannot resist telling stories of people doing so much good for the poor at Christmas time.

Well, the word Christmas means "the birth of Christ," and Christ is born again and again into our hearts and into the hearts and lives of others when we share the unending love that God has for all of us.

The love which shone brightly in our world when Christ was born, that love shone even brighter when Christ rose from the dead after he entered the darkness of sin and death through his passion on the Cross.

That is the mystery that we celebrate in this Holy Eucharist in this joyful celebration of the birth of our Savior. It may be dark and wintry outside, and for some it may even be dark on the inside because of the challenges of life. But all around us we can find the real light and the real joy, not just at Christmas, but always.

Celebrate this light and joy! Give praise and thanks to God for the gift of the Savior. Don't be afraid to wrap him in the swaddling clothes of your life or to invite him to rest in the manger of your life which you may not be convinced is the proper resting place for the Savior of the world.

Allow the Lord Jesus to be born again and again in your heart and the hearts of others with whom you share his light and joy, so that we can continue to born in his life. At Christmas and always, may you know the peace and favor that rests on you this holy night.