

Christmas Midnight Mass Homily – 2011
Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament

Have you ever been in the dark and scared yourself silly? As children we've all experienced this. But even as adults this can happen.

A man had gone camping high up in the Colorado Rockies. Just before sunset George went for a walk by himself on one of the trails surrounding the campground.

He did not pay attention that it had been cloudy all day. There were no stars and the moon was not visible as the sun was setting. George also didn't realize how quickly the sun disappeared that evening.

When George realized what was happening, he turned around and began walking back to the campground as quickly as possible. He remembered that one of the landmarks that would tell him he was getting close was a wooden footbridge that crossed a stream.

George was getting rather nervous as he made his way along to that footbridge. As he first started across the bridge, he felt relieved because he knew he didn't have far to go.

Half-way across, he felt the bridge begin to shake. There was no wind, no noise, and no light. As George tells the story, he was also convinced at that moment that something was on the bridge behind him. He was so overcome with fear that without thinking, George ran for his life to find safety in the cabin with his friends.

Fortunately, nothing happened. But the next day George was determined to find out what was on that bridge. He was convinced it had been a bear.

After examining every blade of grass surrounding the bridge, he concluded that there had been no bear. Using a bit of logic, George decided to retrace his steps, and walk across the bridge as "normally" as possible. Half way across he felt the bridge begin to move and shake, just like it had the night before. He went across again, and the same thing happened.

Then George realized what he felt that night was nothing other than his own movement. There was nothing to fear.

Even if we have never been camping in the mountains on a night in which there were no stars or moonlight, all of us can relate to George's story. Unfortunately, there are many things that make us afraid.

Our world is not always a safe place. In addition to the obvious, like war abroad and violence at home, there are many people who live on the sheer edge of catastrophe. Some people are only a paycheck away from financial disaster. Many deal with sickness which they can't afford to treat or which threatens to debilitate them entirely. And there are a lot of people who are surrounded by others, yet they live with the awful feeling of being unknown and uncared for.

Many of the things that make people feel afraid are beyond their control. They feel very vulnerable and powerless in the face of so many situations and circumstances that they cannot change or even manage.

As we cross over the bridges of life several times a day, most of us, in one way or another, feel our knees shaking. I don't know about you, but I sure wish that we didn't have to keep crossing that bridge over and over again.

There are so many unknowns, so many things that can and do go wrong. It's enough to just go run and hide. Sadly, too many people do just that! They turn to meaningless amusement, alcohol, drugs, self-indulgence, overspending and over-working—whatever can alleviate their fear or anxiety, even if it's only for an hour or two.

I know people who don't look forward to celebrating Christmas because it causes even more stress than they already have.

And I know people who don't look forward to celebrating Christmas because one or two days of peace on earth and good will to men disappears so fast that when Christmas is over and things go back to

normal, their everyday life seems even more fearful or dreadful than it was before.

So where are you with all that on this holy night as we celebrate the Birth of Christ?

I would suggest that some of the details of the Birth of Christ that we heard in the Gospel reading tonight can go a long way in helping us to become more comfortable in our lives as we continue to cross the bridge of life over and over again.

First, we need to make a careful distinction between the reality of danger being present and our reaction to that danger, which can often be fear.

In the story of the Birth of Christ, shepherds were out in the darkness, keeping the night watch. They were surrounded by all sorts of danger in that environment. That's why they kept a constant vigil.

All of a sudden an angel appears and the night lit up brighter than the sunniest day that they had ever seen because it was the glory of the Lord that surrounded them.

How did they react to what is an unknown, potential danger? They were struck with great fear!

The most important line in the Christmas message for the shepherds was, "Do not be afraid, because I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord."

The shepherds were told how to overcome the fear that they experienced at that moment. They were told that

- the sign that their fear would be relieved was an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes in a manger in Bethlehem
- they should go visit that place to see that sign
- their fear would be replaced by peace; a peace that is a gift from God for those on whom his favor rests

What does that mean, on whom his favor rests?

Nowhere in the Gospel is it promised that all of the dangers of the world in which we live would be removed by God.

The world in which we live is no more or no less dangerous than the world

- into which Christ was born
- in which Christ carried out his earthly ministry of preaching the Gospel and working miracles
- in which Jesus Christ was crucified and rose from the dead

The favor that the angels speak of as resting on the shepherds and others, including ourselves, is the favor of God's saving presence.

That presence is not simply some external force that people can contact over the Internet, or order at the drive-in window when the need arises.

That presence, that resting of God's favor, is the fullness of the mystery of the Incarnation.

God did not simply come into the world to be born in Bethlehem and to live for many years in Nazareth or along the shores of Galilee.

Jesus was born into the world so that God could arrive at the place where he truly desires to dwell; where he truly wishes to live – in us.

In other words, when the Word of God in our Christmas liturgy speaks about a Savior, that Word of God tells us about being saved from the inside out as much as from the outside in.

Certainly, God came into our world from his world which we call heaven.

But once we allow God into the place where we really live;

- into the place where we have to confront our deepest fears and anxieties;
- the Savior becomes our internal peace so that no matter what dangers we experience outside of us;

- whether we did not cause them or whether we did cause them because of our sinfulness;
- no matter what they are; Christ is our blessed hope now and for the future, as St. Paul tells us in the second reading.

This happens because Christ truly becomes one with us.

Christmas is about many things. But one of the most important aspects of Christmas is the promise that we don't have to live our lives in fear.

Jesus came into the world to drive out the demons of fear and anxiety. Natural disasters, illness and death, violence, ethnic and political strife have always been with us. And yet, the message of Christmas is still the same: "Do not be afraid!"

Instead, we are to rejoice!

I mentioned at the beginning of these reflections that the truth about Christmas and its significance for us is found in the details in the Gospel story.

One of those details is that the physical birth of Jesus took place in a stable because there was no room for him in the inn.

If you want to find the best way to show that you rejoice in the birth that we celebrate tonight, you need only to welcome Jesus again into your hearts.

When you approach the altar to receive his Body and Blood,

- ask him to be born into your heart
- ask him to stay with you in that place
- ask him to be there to give you the courage, the hope and the peace to overcome any fear or anxiety in your life regardless of the dangers and problems that surround you
- ask him to stay with you now and always.

That's exactly where God wishes to be.

You remember George who was so afraid when he took a walk in the woods on that dark night?

George ends his story by sharing the most important realization that he had from that experience:

- that his fear was not really about the thought that a bear or another wild animal might be behind him on the bridge
- that his fear was that whatever might happen, he was alone.

It's not a coincidence that God chose

- to speak to us about fear in the story of our Savior's birth in Bethlehem
- to remind us in every dimension of Christ's life and death and resurrection and preaching and ministry that the Savior comes to address and overcome our fears and anxieties.

It is God's will; it is the story of the Birth of Christ, that God does not ever want us to be alone. He has indeed come to make his dwelling among us and in us.

And he comes now with the promise that his favor will rest on us and in us forever.

And he will come again at the moment when we cross the bridge of life for the last time.

Isaiah the prophet tells us in the first reading tonight that "the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in a land of gloom a light has shone."

On this holy night the darkness is illuminated not by our Christmas decorations, but by the glory of the Lord that shines all around us in this Eucharistic celebration.

May that glory continue to shine in your hearts, in your families, and in your homes always. It is truly Christ who is our hope of glory.