



“Do not be afraid”: a Christmas homily

by Deacon Greg Kandra



Like a lot of people of a certain age, I remember well the first time I heard this gospel proclaimed – and it wasn't in church.

It was in my parent's den, in Rockville, Maryland, watching an 18-inch Philco black and white TV. The person proclaiming the gospel wasn't a priest or deacon or minister. It was a little boy with a

blanket. It was “A Charlie Brown Christmas. A few weeks ago, there was a documentary on PBS about Charles Schulz, the creator of “Peanuts,” and he talked about how that show came about, and the battles he had to fight with CBS. The executives were nervous about not having a laugh track...nervous about using real children for the voices...and they were REALLY nervous about having that piece of scripture included. God forbid that you should have a Christmas special that actually mentions Christ! But Schulz stuck to his guns. The result is one of television's most beloved and most popular Christmas specials.

And it lives on, even in the age of the DVD. A couple weeks ago, when it was shown once again, it was one of the highest-rated programs on television for that week. About 20 million people watched.

It's a humbling reminder to those of us who climb into the pulpit every week: sometimes the most powerful pulpit isn't a pulpit at all. And often the most effective preacher isn't actually a preacher.

Reading this beautiful gospel once again, I found myself marveling at its power. What is it about Luke's telling of the nativity that makes it so enduring, and endearing? Year after year, century after century, whether on television or in church, we're drawn to this story, and moved by it again and again. It is, for so many of us, “THE” Christmas story.

Part of it is the cast of characters Luke assembles. Luke was the only evangelist who was not Jewish, and his gospel is beautifully inclusive. He is the evangelist for the outsider and the outcast – and so in this birth narrative you have EVERYONE. Jesus, Mary, Joseph, shepherds, angels, even Caesar is mentioned. The only ones who don't appear are the wise men, but they'll pop up on their own holiday, Epiphany, coming in January. In this narrative, you really do see the world spread before us. Everyone is welcome at the stable.

But beyond the setting, and the sentiment, there is a truth here that strikes at the heart of every believing Christian – that truth that defines Christmas.

It is there, in the middle of the gospel, in the very first words that are spoken. “Do not be afraid.”

And then it gets even better.

“Behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.”

“A savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord.”

These are the words we have been longing for. With this moment, the course of human history changes forever. God has become one of us. The

savior's very name proclaims the incredible truth that no one ever thought possible: “Emmanuel.” God is with us. It is a stunning thought, almost overwhelming.

And yet we are told: “Do not be afraid.”

Across two thousand years, those words reach out to us in joy and hope and consolation. No matter who you are, no matter where you live, no matter what your circumstances, this what matters:

Do not be afraid.

To the students at Virginia Tech, to the soldiers in Fallujah and Kabul. To those who lost someone they love in the tragedies of Omaha, or Minneapolis. To the father without a job, or the children pulled apart by divorce or separation:

Do not be afraid.

To the sick and the suffering, the lonely and the lost ... to all those who feel that maybe God has forgotten you. To those who feel, as Mother Teresa did, abandoned to the dark night:

Do not be afraid.

Because even in this darkest of nights, there is light. A savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord. Here is our hope.

He didn't come in grandeur or majesty, to intimidate us. He came as the most helpless and dependent creature of all: a baby, in a manger, in Bethlehem. He loves us so much, God came to us as someone we could not help but love.

So, do not be afraid!

A couple weeks ago I told the story of a Muslim woman in Iraq who – despite the great danger to her life — is converting to Christianity. She'll be baptized a Catholic next Easter. That Muslim woman is living this gospel message. She is not afraid. And she bears witness to this astonishing fact: the Incarnation continues. Christ is still coming to us.

If God makes that possible, imagine what other miracles He has in store.

Yes: on this night, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

A savior has been born.

And he continues to be born in our hearts, if only we will allow it to happen.

That, I think, is the great power of Christmas, the reason why year after year that beautiful passage from Luke resonates. Christmas is about redemption, yes. But it is also about God's overpowering love for us – His reassurance to a troubled, frightened, war-torn world that He is with us, through everything.

He dreams with us. He struggles with us. He grieves with us.

And: He hopes with us.

Remember his name. Emmanuel. God is with us.

So do not be afraid.

In the immortal words of that great philosopher, Linus Van Pelt: “That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown.”

Merry Christmas, everyone.

While this homily is from December 24, 2012, the central theme is still very urgent. Do Not Be Afraid.

A Christmas Eve Homily

Pope Benedict XVI, POPE EMERITUS



Again and again the beauty of this Gospel touches our hearts: a beauty that is the splendor of truth. Again and again it astonishes us that God makes himself a child so that we may love him, so that we

may dare to love him, and as a child trustingly lets himself be taken into our arms. It is as if God were saying: I know that my glory frightens you, and that you are trying to assert yourself in the face of my grandeur. So now I am coming to you as a child, so that you can accept me and love me.

I am also repeatedly struck by the Gospel writer's almost casual remark that there was no room for them at the inn. Inevitably the question arises, what would happen if Mary and Joseph were to knock at my door. Would there be room for them? And then it occurs to us that Saint John takes up this seemingly chance comment about the lack of room at the inn, which drove the Holy Family into the stable; he explores it more deeply and arrives at the heart of the matter when he writes: "he came to his own home, and his own people received him not" (*Jn* 1:11). The great moral question of our attitude towards the homeless, towards refugees and migrants, takes on a deeper dimension: do we really have room for God when he seeks to enter under our roof? Do we have time and space for him? Do we not actually turn away God himself? We begin to do so when we have no time for God. The faster we can move, the more efficient our time-saving appliances become, the less time we have. And God? The question of God never seems urgent. Our time is already completely full. But matters go deeper still. Does God actually have a place in our thinking? Our process of thinking is structured in such a way that he simply ought not to exist. Even if he seems to knock at the door of our thinking, he has to be explained away. If thinking is to be taken seriously, it must be structured in such a way that the "God hypothesis" becomes superfluous. There is no room for him. Not even in our feelings and desires is there any room for him. We want ourselves. We want what we can seize hold of, we want happiness that is within our reach, we want our plans and purposes to succeed. We are so "full" of ourselves that there is no room left for God. And that means there is no room for others either, for children, for the poor, for the stranger. By reflecting on that one simple saying about the lack of room at the inn, we have come to see how much we need to listen to Saint Paul's exhortation: "Be transformed by the renewal of your mind" (*Rom* 12:2). Paul speaks of renewal, the opening up of our intellect (*nous*), of the whole way we view the world and ourselves. The conversion that we need must truly reach into the depths of our relationship with reality. Let us ask the Lord that we may become vigilant for his presence, that we may hear how softly yet insistently he knocks at the door of our being and willing. Let us ask that we may make room for him within ourselves, that we may recognize him also in those through whom he speaks to us: children, the suffering, the abandoned, those who are excluded and the poor of this world.

Complete text at <http://www.crisismagazine.com/2012/the-2012-christmas-eve-homily-of-pope-benedict-xvi>

A Christmas Poem

By Jeanne ?

It seems like Christmas
Has become about what you buy.
Boxes, bows
And presents so high.

Sometimes we get lost,
And lose our way
We forget what really happened,
On the first Christmas day.

A child was born
In a stable so small
He would soon grow up,
And save us all.

Shepherds, kings, and angels
Full of God's light
Saw the newborn Savior,
On the first Christmas night.

The best present ever,
Cannot be wrapped in a bow,
It's the love of Jesus Christ,
Always, wherever you go.

Keep the child in your heart
Throughout the New Year.
Remember that God loves you,
And is always very near.



CHRISTMAS PRAYER

God of love, Father of all,

The darkness that covered the earth has given way to the bright dawn of your Word made flesh. Make us a people of this light. Make us faithful to your Word, that we may bring your life to the waiting world. Grant this through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Holy Day Mass Schedule

Thursday, December 31st at 6:00 PM

Friday, January 1, at 8:00 AM