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May the joy of Jesus fill your heart as we celebrate His birth and rejoice in the hope and peace we find in Him!

Happy Advent to you!

It's the most wonderful time of the year..." So goes the familiar Christmas song, crooned most memorably by Andy Williams. What a wonderful time for us to celebrate again in these weeks leading up to our celebration of the birth of Jesus. The wonder and majesty of this season reminds us again and again of God's grace for all humanity in Jesus Christ. Every twinkling light, every evergreen branch, every candle and carol reminds us again of God's good news for all mankind. All the Christmas decorations proclaim the glorious truth about God's greatest gift to us all in Jesus! Can't you just hear Linus, from the Peanuts, proclaim the words from the Gospel of Luke, "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."

Jesus is the reason for the season! While the world around us places the emphasis on finding the right gift for the ones we love, God already delivered the best gift for all humanity in Jesus. He came as a baby, in vulnerable humanity, grew up and willingly bore a cross for our sinfulness. Because of His birth, because of His death, because of His resurrection, we now have new and eternal life. It is good and right that we place the focus of this season on the birth of Jesus as we await His return. But the Christmas story is rich with characters and life lessons for us as Christians. For instance, imagine what that first Christmas was like for Mary and Joseph.

We know a lot of facts about Mary and Joseph. We know Mary was thrust into a limelight that she neither asked for nor wanted. We know that Joseph, too, was placed in a circumstance that was challenging and confusing. Yet, despite it all, they surrendered to God's plan. Sometimes it seems that God's plan isn't the easiest way. Unlike our day, when many of the social and moral morays have been relaxed or removed, this situation created a crisis for Mary and Joseph.

For Mary, it meant trying to explain the unexplainable in a society that didn't look kindly on a woman becoming pregnant outside of marriage. How could she face her own parents, much less the people of her village. Word (read gossip) spread as quickly then as it does today. We can only surmise how Mary felt as people whispered and pointed as she passed by. While she found confidence and comfort in knowing that she was the handmaiden of the Lord, it still had to hurt to be condemned by those she once considered friends.

Joseph, the carpenter, also struggled. First, the woman he was in love with, whom he wanted to marry, was already pregnant, and Joseph knew it wasn't him. He was between a rock and a hard place. To walk away from the one he had pledged his love to seemed harsh and hurtful. But to stay in this relationship was to subject himself to the same kind of abuse and mistreatment that Mary was experiencing. God came to Joseph and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the

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Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins.” The Bible says that when Joseph woke up he did what God commanded and took Mary for his wife. Do you ever wonder if, when Joseph went to Mary after that experience, she looked at him and said, “See, I told you so...” Probably not... But Joseph did kind of learn to let go and let God have His way with his life. And so must we!

Now, I know that all of you are familiar with the Christmas story, and the history surrounding it, so I don’t want to give you a history lesson. But I do think there’s an important lesson for the Church in our day. And it’s about how we treat those around us. I don’t know about you, but standing in the wings, historically speaking, looking back on those events, I can’t imagine why they would have treated obedient servants like Mary and Joseph so poorly. They weren’t welcome anywhere! There are times in my life when I could definitely relate to that.

Mary and Joseph were chosen for a very specific task—to parent Jesus. Of all people in time and history, God chose them. This is an act of grace. They didn’t volunteer or sign up for the job. They didn’t apply or politic in order to be considered for the job. God chose them. God also chose you! He chose you to be His very own in the waters of Baptism, where He placed His own indelible mark on you to say you are Mine through Jesus! However, God also chose you in other ways. For some of you, that choosing was to be a professional church worker, whether it be a pastor or teacher, a DCE or musician. God gave you the gifts and skills to do that, and not for your own benefit. What teacher stands in front of a classroom all day for their own benefit? I’ve been around teachers long enough, in fact I’m married to one, to know that the greatest benefit a teacher can receive, apart from a salary, is the satisfaction of having imparted some knowledge to a student. When a student that sat in your classroom ten years ago comes back and tells you what it meant for you to be their teacher, or for that matter their pastor, youth leader, choir director, and the list goes on, it feels great, and we know that God is using us in the way He, Himself, designed us to be. God chose you, and despite any misgivings you may experience at the present time, He has you where He wants you—or else He would move you!

Mary and Joseph didn’t give up. They moved forward, in spite of all the animosity they experienced. In my mind’s eye, I see them traveling to Bethlehem, Mary great with child, and talking about how much better life will be in a new place without all the rumors and gossip. But after a long and arduous journey, they arrive only to find that they’re out of luck. They had no email, no cell phone, and made no reservation. They were on their own without a place to stay. Again, there may have been times when we’ve felt just like that. But what about those around you who are the Mary and Joseph’s of the world? Those who are displaced or misplaced, without a place to go, not having a friend in the world? Are we not called to reach out to them with the love of Jesus? In Hebrews 13 we read, “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.” I often wonder about the Innkeeper, who showed Mary and Joseph such kindness. While he didn’t have a room, he didn’t just turn them away. He gave them the best he could given the resources available to him at the time. It wasn’t much, but it was all that Mary and Joseph needed. It served God’s purposes!

Over the past year and a half as District President I have had the great privilege of traveling around the District, visiting congregations, as well as across the Synod for various reasons. Being a new DP can be a humbling experience. We live in a time when the role of the Synod and District, not to mention the role of the District President is not well understood. In fact, in a post-church culture, even

within the church, people just don't really care. We tend to focus myopically on our own territory. I can still slip into many places unannounced and unknown. It's always interesting for me to do this when and where I can, nowadays with my wife! I've noticed that there are really two kinds of congregations in the Florida-Georgia District. Those that are friendly, and those that say they are friendly, but whose friendliness only extends to its current members.

I've been at this long enough to realize that my position is really, in some ways, trivial. I feel kind of like Joseph must have felt at times. Joseph was a small character player and cog as a servant of Jesus, and yet his role was God given and important. We don't see Joseph handing out cigars at the birth of Jesus, or putting himself up for Father of the Year. He simply protected and cared for his family, providing for their needs and carrying out the role God had for him. That's how I would like to be. I am here simply as a servant. I have no super powers, am no closer to God than any of you can be, and sometimes make good decisions, and sometimes make not so good decisions. Through it all, I am seeking to be faithful to God's call on my life. The point is I don't visit congregations with a hope or desire to be put on any pedestal. That being said, here are some observations.

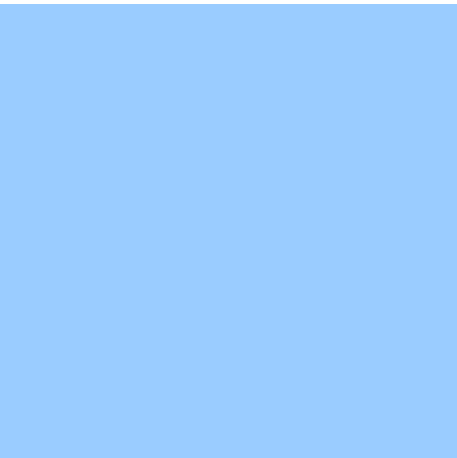
Edith and I have visited congregations that have overwhelmed us with their kindness, generosity and welcome. Then there are others. We visited one congregation where the only words spoken to Edith by a congregational member were to explain to her that she was in their seat. I didn't think it got that cold in Florida.... Now, fortunately, that's not been the common experience, but I hope it makes you wonder about your congregation, and how welcoming it is to your community.

We are living in post-church times, and that means that while the world may not actively oppose the Christian church, it doesn't really care about it either. It's like the choice between Walmart and Target. Some prefer one, some the other. In our culture, people simply accept that some prefer to go to church, others prefer not to. More and more are choosing not to attend. The Church asks, "Why?" I believe that we've lost sight of the reason God formed the Church. We see it as a safe place from a sinful world, when God placed His church in the midst of the world to shine His light for all to see. But how will they see or hear the good news if the very place God formed to draw people to the cross of Jesus rejects people who are not "part of the club"? While cleanliness may be next to godliness, I have to believe that friendliness comes in a close third. How can we draw people to Jesus if we make them feel unwelcome in worship?

These next weeks are prime time worship opportunities for unbelievers. Some will come out of curiosity, some will come out of annual habit, still others will come truly seeking the truth of the good news about Jesus. The question really is, are we ready to receive them? Bethlehem wasn't ready for Joseph and Mary, but let us make every effort to prepare our churches to receive all who would come to seek a Savior this Christmas. Go out of your way to train the congregation to greet and welcome visitors. Who knows, you may be entertaining an angel unaware, or even the District President!

Blessings to you on your celebrations of the Christ Child, in your parish and especially in your home. May these days be filled with a sense of urgency and a graceful journey to the Manger to see Jesus, who is the reason for the season!

Greg



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"The love of Christ urges us on." 2 Corinthians 5:14