

**HOMILY FOR THE SOLEMNITY OF THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD -
CHRISTMAS MIDNIGHT MASS
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois
December 25, 2011**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Probably the most famous Christmas story in the world, apart from the Nativity itself, is Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. It has done much to foster the conviction that Christmas is a time for forgiveness and family gatherings. Not only does the repentant Scrooge send a turkey to his long-suffering clerk Bob Cratchit, but Scrooge himself goes to dinner with his nephew and wider family. "Nothing could be heartier," Dickens wrote. "Wonderful party, wonderful games, wonderful unanimity, won-der-ful happiness!"

One of the most popular television Christmas specials is *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. In it, when a frustrated Charlie Brown asks what is the meaning of Christmas, Linus responds with a recitation of Luke's story of the birth of Jesus, the very Gospel we read at Midnight Mass. But, poor Charlie still does not quite "get it," and perhaps neither do we. The real meaning of Christmas is not revealed until the end of the story. Snoopy has won first place in a contest for the best outdoor Christmas

decorations. Snoopy's doghouse is a gaudy collection of garland, ornaments, and flashing lights. Next to Snoopy's doghouse, Charlie Brown's little Christmas tree that is shedding its needles seems worthless – until the children strip Snoopy's doghouse of its gaudy display and turn the little tree into something magnificent.

Earlier, while rehearsing the Christmas pageant, part of the cause of Charlie Brown's frustration was when Lucy had handed out the scripts. When she gave Sherman his script and told him he was to be a shepherd, he lamented, “Not a shepherd again?! Why do I always have to be a shepherd?!” Despite what we might think of the story of Jesus’ birth, the star of the story is not only Jesus. The shepherds also share top billing. This is their story and the story of what God has done for them. It is the story of the ugly little tree that can become magnificent with a little love.

Sherman didn't realize the importance of his role. The co-stars of the Christmas story are the lowly shepherds. Like the story of the ugly little tree made magnificent through love, it is also the story of the shepherds and what God has done for them. It was so great an experience that they left their flocks exposed so that they could be pulled into God's presence.

This is a story of generosity and Christmas celebrates generosity. It is a generosity of love that is affective. It is the story of God's generosity with us. God has come to us, and it can become a story of our generous response to such great a gift.

There is a fairytale quality to Luke's account of the birth of Jesus, where the harsh realities of the actual event are softened by the glow of the miraculous events surrounding it. But if we have no more than a romantic image of it, that does not bear close scrutiny. Luke reminds us of the political realities of the day, with whole populations on the move in order to be registered in the census commanded by Caesar Augustus. The economic reality is just as uncomfortable: the baby is laid in a manger, an animal's feeding box, because no other accommodation is available to poorer people.

It is no accident, therefore, that Luke records that the first to hear of the birth of the Messiah were shepherds, the poorest of the poor, living in the open, moving from place to place with their sheep, having to defend them from wild animals. The words the angel uses are significant: the angel tells the shepherds that a savior has been born "to you" - Jesus is to be *their* savior, not just the savior of the high and mighty. The shepherds are not expected to believe the words of the

angel on their own merit: a sign has been given to them. When they see a child, wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger, the angel's words will be confirmed – the rumor of good news really is Good News.

Suddenly, with the angel, there is a “a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel.” The shepherds have a vision of heaven, of a world above and beyond their own, a vision that will inspire them and add a new dimension to their lives. The song of the angels is not a concert performance to bring a little cheer to the shepherds on that first Christmas night; it is, rather, the song of the blessed that is constantly being sung to God.

This reality is evoked at every Mass. During the Preface, some aspect of God's saving work is recounted. Each Preface closes with “And so, with the Angels and all the Saints we declare your glory,” or similar words. At that moment, as we join in the “Holy, Holy, Holy,” we are with the shepherds in the fields, adding our voices to those of the angels. At that moment, it is as though the veil between heaven and Earth has been torn, enabling us to glimpse God's glory. At that moment, we can imagine that the roof of the church has rolled back, and we can see the spiritual reality of God's kingdom. This vision changes everything for us, and is the key to our life and our faith.

There are times when we can be comforted by the romanticized picture of Christmas with which we are so familiar: the familiar story, the crib, memories of childhood, Christmas ritual. There are times too when we can see behind the story to the coming of God into the harsh realities of human life.

For some people, these harsh realities have only become worse in the past year. Since the uprising in Egypt last January, human rights groups have estimated that as many as 100,000 Christians have fled to the United States to escape rising religious persecution in Egypt.¹ Meanwhile, Archbishop Louis Sako of Kirkuk in northern Iraq said that again this year “Midnight Christmas Mass has been canceled in Baghdad, Mosul and Kirkuk as a consequence of the never-ending assassinations of Christians.”² He said that 54 Iraqi churches have been bombed and at least 905 Christians have been killed in various acts of violence, while hundreds of thousands of Christians have fled Iraq since 2003.³ We stand in solidarity with them and with persecuted Christians throughout the world.

Closer to home, just this evening, St. Mary Church in Brussels, Illinois, burned down after Mass. No one was hurt, thank God, but the loss of this sacred edifice in our diocese will be devastating for the

people of this parish. Let us remember them in our prayers, knowing that Christ's birth is especially meaningful for those who suffer and who long for His coming.

We know that the birth of the Christ child is not just a feel-good story, but it is significant and life-changing for us and for our world. Whenever we face some personal difficulty, or feel down about the state of the world, or are burdened with worries, we can be certain that God is in the middle of it all: the Word has become flesh, and really lives in our midst. The "Holy, Holy, Holy" reminds us of this, not just this Christmas night but every time we come to Mass.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Lucette Lagnado, "Egypt's Embattled Christians Seek Room in America," THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, December 23-25, 2011, pp. 1 and 12.

² Catholic News Service, "Midnight Masses canceled in Iraq because of growing security concerns," December 22, 2011, <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/1105024.htm>.

³ Sam Dagher, "An 'Arab Winter' Chills Christians," THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, December 5, 2011, pp. 1 and 14.