

Christmas Eve, Year A  
December 24, 2011 ~ Luke 2: 1-20  
Fr. Jim Cook

## *“What’s It All About?”*

I know I can’t speak for everyone, but for me, there is so much to love about Christmas. And I’m *not* just talking about the presents. I find this to be a season when people are generally optimistic, and the heart is easily warmed.

In my mind, Christmas is a time when families gather, when gifts are exchanged, and meals are shared. It’s a time when parents and children will bundle into the family car and drive to a candle-lit evening service of worship, where the grand old hymns will be sung with special gusto. Neighborhoods normally dark at night are suddenly ablaze with colorful lights and beautiful displays — and children, being transported in slowly moving cars, gaze on in wonder and awe.

In the Cook household, the special treat for Peggy and me is the fact that Laura and Emily are on winter break from their studies, and the family is once again under one roof. Just this morning, the four of us spent several hours together in our family room. I sat next to the hearth where I could tend to the fire; Peggy and the girls were curled up on a sofa, watching the Christmas tree. We shared stories and memories, and got caught up with each other. In retrospect, I can see that it was precious time, sacred even, and will probably be one of my fondest memories of this Christmas season.

In so many ways, this really is “the most wonderful time of the year.” But it didn’t start out that way. The original Christmas story was not quite so wonderful. We heard part of the story in our gospel reading, but time and traditions have obscured the harsh realities that were taking place in the lives of Mary, Joseph and Jesus.

For example, it’s a story that takes place in a small country that was occupied by a brutally oppressive foreign government. It’s a story that starts with a teenaged girl who is pregnant with the child of someone other than her fiancé. It’s a story of a young working-class man who learns that his fiancé is pregnant with someone else’s child. It’s a story of how this couple takes a ninety-mile journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem — he on foot, she, nine months pregnant, and riding on a donkey — in order to be registered, so that the occupying government can collect more taxes. It’s the story of a young couple who are so poor they cannot afford proper accommodations in Bethlehem, and so they have to make do with a stall in a barn. It’s the story of a king who is so zealous to protect himself from a possible pretender to his throne, that he orders the slaughter of all male children residing in and around Bethlehem who are two years of age or younger. And, finally, it’s the story of

a young family who become refugees, fleeing to a neighboring country, to protect the life of their newborn child.

It really isn't a "holly jolly" story after all, is it? But one of the questions that we need to ask, is this: How did something so wonderful, like our Christmas season, arise from something so horrible?

Well, when I was a child, I looked forward each year to watching *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. For me, the climax of the show came when Charlie Brown asked Linus what Christmas is all about, and Linus responded by reciting a few of the verses we heard in our gospel reading:

*In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." ... And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"*

As a child, I would listen to Linus and get goose-bumps, and think, "That's it!" I wasn't sure what "it" was, but that was it. But now, when I watch that very same show, I wonder, "Is that *really* it?" And in my heart of hearts, I know that, no, it's not.

If we really want to understand what Christmas is really all about — if we want to get beneath the colored lights, tinsel and pretty wrapping — we need to revisit the story of Mary and Joseph, and think about the way things were *supposed* to go for them. But I'm going to tell the story in simpler terms, so that we'll be able to relate to it — to identify with it — a bit more easily. But, make no mistake, it's still the story of Mary and Joseph. So, here goes.

One day, a nice young couple from a small town is planning to get married. Their whole future lies ahead of them, and they like thinking about it. They get excited when they talk about what their new home will look like. She blushes when they talk about how many children they will have. His chest swells with pride when they talk about how he's going to support his family with his carpentry business. Everything seems fine. Perfect, in fact.

But one day, something completely unexpected happens — actually, a whole *series* of unexpected things happen; things that are potentially devastating and life-changing — and suddenly their picture-perfect world is overturned. Suddenly, all their plans and dreams are derailed. But, what are they going to do? What's going to happen to them?

In fact, for a long time, we *don't* know what happened to them. But the really surprising thing is that, a number of years later, we encounter them once more. Somehow, they've gotten their lives back on track. And they have a son: he's a healthy twelve-year-old, a bit precocious at times, and often he doesn't listen to his mother, but otherwise he's perfect. And this family has returned to their small town. They've finally got their new home. The man has finally set up his carpentry business. And while they don't have a whole passel of children, like they hoped, their one son is the apple of their eyes. No, it wasn't the life they expected, or dreamt of, but, all things considered, things turned out alright.

So, my question is this: How did they get from Point A, where they have everything to look forward to, to Point B, when their world comes crashing down, to Point C, where they're back on their feet again, moving in the right direction?

I recently read a book that helps me answer that question. It's entitled *Drops Like Stars*, and it was written by Rob Bell. After describing a couple of families who had their worlds overturned by tragedy, Bell suggests that, while many people in that situation will ask the question "Why this?" or "Why me?" the question they *should* be asking is "What now?" And the reason Bell gives is because when we ask "Why this?" or "Why me?" we tend to focus all of our attention on ourselves, and on our loss and pain, and, often, not much further. But "What now?" is a different question altogether. When we ask "What now?" we are looking outward, beyond ourselves, beyond the pain and loss, and looking through a doorway that opens onto a path that leads us into to deeper communion with God.

Why that should be has been pondered by many people, but I think Catherine of Aragon got closest to the answer when she wrote

*"None get to God but through trouble."*

And I suppose that's the case because trouble, and the pain it causes us, remind us that things aren't how they're supposed to be. They remind us that, though we thought we were in control, we weren't. They remind us that we need to look *somewhere* else, and to *someone* else.

I didn't know this before reading Bell's book, but apparently Native Americans have a tradition of leaving a blemish in one corner of the rug they are weaving — usually a handful of loose threads, dangling from one corner — because that's where they believe the Spirit enters.

Bell writes:

*"I can relate to the rugs."*

*I want desperately for things to go 'how they're supposed to.' Which is another way of saying 'how I want them to,' which is another way of saying 'according to my plan.'*

*And that, as we all know, isn't [always] how it works.*

*But it's in that disappointment, in that confusion, in that pain — the pain that comes from things not going how I wanted them to — that I find the same thing happening, again and again. I come to the end of myself, to the end of my power, the end of my strength, the end of my understanding, only to find in that place of powerlessness a strength and peace that weren't there before.*

*I keep discovering that it's in the blemish that the Spirit enters."*

I like that. But I also like what Eugene Patterson wrote when he translated one of the beatitudes in this fashion: "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule" (Matthew 5:3, *The Message*).

One of the basic truths of life is that we *are* going to suffer. And it's going to change us. We can't alter that. But what we can do, is have a say in *how* it will change us. We can become bitter, or better. We can either close up, or open up. We can become less than we were, or more than we are. We can become destroyed by it, or through it we can be reborn.

Mary and Joseph had made plans. They had dreams and hopes. And then ... well, life happened. But the Spirit got in through that blemish in their lives, and, by the grace of God, they were able to rise above it, and build upon it, and move beyond it.

And so can we.

And this, I believe, is what Christmas is all about. Every year it stands as a reminder (for those who have eyes to see) that suffering and tragedy are *not* the end of the story. Every year we hear this evening's gospel reading, and we are reminded that what happens to us, does *not* always have to define who we are, or what we shall be. And like the mythical Phoenix, we too can rise from the ashes. If that's what we choose.

May God grant you grace to find his light in the darkness, his hope through the desolation, and his peace in the midst of turmoil. And may God give you eyes to see that "he who is in you is greater than ... [anything that] is in the world" (I John 4:4).

God bless you. God love you. And merry Christmas.