

The Solemnity of the Nativity of our Lord-Christmas Mass
December 25, 2021 | Cathedral of Saint Paul (At Dawn: Isaiah 62:11-12; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:15-20)
Readings: Isaiah 52:7-10; Hebrews 1:1-6; John 1:1-18

“The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” With these words, the Gospel of St. John reminds us that Jesus Christ is the light for whom all humanity has been waiting. Here in the northern hemisphere, the symbolism of the light and darkness is particularly apt.

Just this past Tuesday, we plunged to the nadir of darkness– the Winter Solstice. On that day, the sunlight lasted for just 8 hours and 46 minutes. That is nearly seven fewer hours of daylight than on June 21. However, since Tuesday, we’ve gained 17 seconds–the light has begun to triumph once again, both meteorologically and spiritually speaking.

The Christmas message is sprinkled across the readings in several Masses, whether yesterday’s Vigil, the Mass at Night, the Mass at Dawn or this Mass During the Day. [Dawn: We are told that Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart.” She too was moved to a deeper silence, speaking less, remaining singularly focused on the Lord.]

Each has its own character and emphasis, and on Christmas Day we rejoice in the light of the Word made flesh. It is difficult to conceive of the “Word” – it’s much easier to relate to a tiny baby in a manger. And yet that child is himself the Light of the World, the Son of God, who assumed our human nature to accomplish our salvation in it.¹

The Good News was neither directed solely to the shepherds in the field, nor only to us in Church today. The Good News was then and is today for all humanity shrouded in the darkness of our own sin. The God who is shrouded in mystery reveals himself in the person of a tiny and innocent child. According to Scripture, he is adored in utter silence.

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, para. # 461

The transition from darkness to light is one of the most basic and yet profound symbols of spiritual progress.² And in the cold, darkness and stillness of this unusual Minnesota winter with its foot of melted snow, we gather to celebrate the Nativity of Our Lord and Savior. Christmas represents the pre-eminent act demonstrating the self-emptying love of God, the light coming to dispel the darkness of our sin.

In descending to earth in the person of Jesus, God also pulls us up towards the heights of heaven. God may seem unapproachable on so many days of the year, often due to our own spiritual blindness. But not today! God desires to dwell amongst us in utter simplicity and silence.

Still, a question presents itself. Why was Joseph silent? Why are we not privy to his words? Many Christians have been both puzzled and dare I say, a bit disappointed. Wouldn't we love to know what he said? Was he shy or just overwhelmed? Perhaps none of the evangelists ever had the chance to ask him or thought it unimportant? Or he was speechless!

Joseph was silently absorbed into the mission given to him by God. He disappeared into obscurity so that the Light of the World might shine unabated, unfettered. Many are afraid today due to the tremendous uncertainty we experience in our world. The pandemic is as confusing and confounding as ever, with mixed signals all around us.

We may be tempted to think that God is not ultimately "in charge," or inexplicably absent. The loneliness that many have experienced is real; do not be ashamed by it. Acknowledge it; recognize the relative paucity of personal engagement we have had dealt with for many months.

Though it has taken much longer than we thought, people are inching towards normalcy. Christmas is the perfect antidote to fear, casting it aside and inviting us to trust that Our Savior is here in our midst.

² *Architecture of Silence: Cistercian Abbeys of France*, Terryl Kinder, 2000

Amidst the uncertainty that lingers, we must resist the temptation to question our belief in Divine Providence. Rather, we are invited to behold God's face in the presence of a tiny and helpless child. All of our concerns for the future, our problems, disappointments and failures – all these may be placed before the Crib, and laid there to rest, at least for now. Focus on the light; engage the silence of St. Joseph.

For to us a Savior has been born in our midst, and He came to bring light to all the darkness of our lives. The limitless Light of God has been focused and concentrated this day into but a tiny spot, a place, a focal point that is the most unlikely of places– a manger, a stable for animals. The manger invites contemplation. In a world so torn by dissension and discord, we are shown a better way.

The silence of St. Joseph is not akin to staring a screen, immersed in our devices. It is a contemplative silence, which is anything but a void of meaning. The gaze of Joseph is expansive, filled with wonder and awe. It is not the blank stare of one who is bored. Boredom has no place in the life of faith because there is always something at which to marvel or today, someone to behold in awe.

We do not have to search for God; He has found us, and this is the reason for our joy today. Our mighty God ventured into the night of silence, a reverent silence, a profound simplicity, and he ventured there to find and save us. The Light of Divine Love has come into our world anew. May the silence and peace of this solemn and joyous day abide in your hearts forever.