

I

Child

Good morning, boys and girls. Do you know how you got your name? (Responses -- Picked by relative; named after someone; somebody liked it; and so forth.) How many of you picked your own names? Nobody? How many of you like your names? (Don't press it!) Names say a lot about people. Often names are chosen by parents because of their meanings. Does anyone here know the meaning of his or her name? (Allow two or three if they want to respond. Tell meaning of your own name if you know it.) Names may not be as important to us as they once were, but it is nice to have a name, isn't it?

When Jesus was born, somebody very special chose his name and sent a messenger to tell Joseph. Do you know who chose the name "Jesus" for the baby born in the manger? (Response.) God sent an angel to Joseph in a dream and told him to name the baby "Jesus." Do you know why God chose that name? (Responses.) The name "Jesus" in the Hebrew language is Joshua and it means "Savior." God said, "It is He who will save his people from their sins." We give a very special place to the name of Jesus in our worship and in our lives. We honor his name and know that it is a name that is above every other name because Jesus is the Son of God. One of the most familiar pictures of Jesus that has ever been painted is by a man named Sallman. We don't really know what Jesus looked like because there were no cameras in those days and no one that we know of ever painted a portrait of him. But this little card will be a reminder for you of the man we know as our Lord. His name is Jesus. (Give picture cards.) (Prayer to exalt and magnify the name of Jesus.)

Adult

When I meet with a couple in preparation for their baby's baptism, I always ask this question: Have you prepared a will and have you specified in it who would rear your child if you were removed from the picture? Young parents don't like to even think about such a possibility, but life's uncertainties make it necessary. It's a tough question. Whom do you trust enough to rear your precious child? God had to answer that question when he decided to send his son Jesus to planet earth. God had to select a mother and a stepfather for his son.

Today's Gospel gives us the opportunity to focus in on one of the main figures in the stories of the Birth of Our Lord, or the Infancy Narratives, St. Joseph. First of all, the term infancy narratives. These are the Christmas stories as found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. We will not have the story of Jesus' birth on Christmas when we have the Prologue of the Gospel of John which gives a theological presentation of the Eternal Word of God become flesh.

The Infancy Narratives in the Gospel of Luke present Joseph as the foster father of the Lord, but the main focus outside of Jesus is placed on Mary. It's the Gospel of Matthew, today's gospel to be exact, that focuses on Joseph. This makes a great deal of

sense. Matthew's main audience was Jewish Christians. Joseph was of the line of David. The Jewish people were very much aware that God had promised David that his Kingdom would never end.

But the Gospel also makes it clear that Joseph was not the natural or birth father of the Lord. Mary was a Virgin. This makes creation complete. We are created by a man and a woman. Adam was created out of nothing. Eve was created out of a man. Jesus was created out of a woman.

The child was conceived through the Holy Spirit. So, why is Jesus seen as part of the line of David through Joseph? This is because Joseph names the child. For the ancients this meant he had made the child his own. We can even say that he adopted the child. Now we view adoption as a legal procedure. The ancients viewed adoption as both a legal act and a spiritual act. When a man adopted a child, all that made that man who he is, his background, his ancestry, all of this poured out upon the child. When Joseph named the child, adopted the child, Kind David, King Solomon, and all that was part of Joseph's ancestry became part of Jesus' ancestry. The prophets predicted that the Messiah would come through the line of David. This takes place through Joseph.

Even though the infancy narratives in Matthew focus on Joseph, Joseph is not quoted. But we still know a great deal about him. We know that he was a righteous man. That meant that he was in the right with God. And we know that Joseph was open to the guidance of God, given to him three different times in dreams.

One of Joseph's ancestors was the patriarch Joseph. This was the son of Jacob whom God spoke to through dreams. His brothers, you remember, were jealous of him and were about to put him to death, when they changed their mind and sold him into slavery to an Egyptian merchant. The merchant's wife tried to entice Joseph, but he remained honorable, so she had him put into prison, claiming that he assaulted her. Joseph's righteousness was rewarded by God. Joseph had dreams about a coming famine in the area. The Pharaoh heard about these and sent for Joseph. He believed him and placed Joseph as administrator of the Kingdom of Egypt. Joseph had huge silos built to store grain for coming years. When the famine came, Egypt had plenty and could also sell their grain to other nations. You might remember that Joseph's brother's came groveling to him when famine hit their families.

Our Joseph, St. Joseph, received three messages in a dream which includes an angel. The Jews reinforced by the story of Joseph that God spoke in dreams to people. God also sent messages through angels as we saw in the Annunciation. So in a sense that Joseph got a double whammy so that he would accept the importance of the message. He was told not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife earlier. A second dream took place after the birth in Bethlehem. Joseph was told to take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt for the wicked King Herod meant to kill Jesus. After Herod died, and while the Holy Family was in

Egypt, Joseph had another dream, this one telling him to return to Palestine, which he did but avoiding Jerusalem.

The most important information we have about Joseph is not that he was a dreamer; it was that Joseph was a righteous man, a just man. A just person puts his or her relationship with God before all else in life and cares for people as God would care for them. In scriptures, someone who is just reflects God's compassion.

We all know the story so well. Joseph was about to marry a beautiful young girl. Then he learned that she was pregnant. He was devastated. He must have been heart broken. His life must have appeared to be shattered. Now Jewish Law would come to the aid of a man in his situation. The offending woman would be tried, and most probably stoned. If there were extenuating circumstances and she was lucky, she would be cast out of society, and treated with scorn the rest of her life, a pariah, an outcast, forced to beg for food for herself and her child.

Joseph was a just man. Joseph was a compassionate man. He would not do this to the girl. He would not expose Mary to the law. He was certain that God couldn't possibly want that to happen. He would send her away to a distant relative where she could live somewhat of a normal life with the child. Treating Mary with kindness was more important than his rights before the Law.

There is a great deal that we need to learn from St. Joseph. So many times we invoke the law of the land rather than consider how God is calling us to behave. We rush to sue someone who has offended us instead of consider how we can settle the situation in a Christ like way. We hide behind the law as we tear apart families.

The basic problem is that there are many Americans who place country before God. St. Paul tells us that in Philippians 3:20 that our citizenship is in heaven. God comes first, then country. What we need to do as Catholics is work hard that our country's laws reflect the law of the Kingdom. What we should never do is invoke the law of the land over the law of God.

Joseph was exposed to ridicule. Some people had to have known that Mary was pregnant and that Joseph was not the father. Joseph had the law on his side. But Joseph was just. He was compassionate. He asked himself, "What would God want me to do?" Then he made the decision to protect Mary, even though at that point in his mind, it appeared that she had offended him. He would send her away where she could be safe. It was after Joseph made the decision to do what God would want him to do, that the angel appeared to him in the dream. He was not only to care for Mary and the child. Joseph was to name the child. This child would really, perhaps not physically, but really be Joseph's. We him also as the patron who take children into their home as in adoption

and foster parenting. The Church recognizes that by becoming the father of the Holy Family, Joseph became the father of the Universal Church.

Joseph is one of our greatest saints. His greatness flows from the fact that Joseph was righteous. Joseph was just. Joseph was compassionate. Today we pray to St. Joseph to give us the courage to be righteous. Give us the courage, St. Joseph, to choose the way of the Kingdom of Love over the ways of the kingdoms of man.

II

One Christmas season when Shirley Duncanson's daughter was nearing her third birthday, Duncanson decided to take her along with her brothers ages 1, 4, 6, 8 out shopping. The little girl saw a doll that she wanted. Nothing Duncanson could say or do would alter her desire. She wanted that doll and she wanted it then. No reminder that Christmas was coming that she needed to be good because Santa Claus might be watching had any impact on her. With a one-year-old in the cart, and three other children to keep track of, Duncanson was losing patience. She tried to drag her daughter away from the doll section . . . but with every tug on her arm came a shrieking cry, "I want a dolly for my Christmas. I want a dolly for my Christmas."

So Duncanson walked away, keeping track of her from a distance. She still remembers what her daughter did next. I'll let you guess. Did her little girl come running after her? Did her daughter tell her that she was wrong to beg and beg and beg for a doll? No she didn't do any of these things. She lay on the floor and screamed, "I want a dolly for my Christmas. I want a dolly for my Christmas."

Any of you parents been there?

While the little girl protested and screamed, her mother knew what her daughter did not. At home there was a doll waiting for her that she would receive on Christmas morning a doll much better than the one she was begging for. A doll that she would enjoy more than any doll she ever had. At that moment, though, in her demand for instant gratification all the little girl wanted was a shabby imitation of the gift her mother had already intended to give.

Any of you ever had a child like that? Any of you ever been a child like that? Any of you ever been that way with your heavenly Parent?

The writer of the epistle of James says to his readers, "Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door! Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord."

Those are the words on which I would like for you to focus for just a few moments: "as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord."

It's hard for any of us at any age to be patient.

One of my favorite stories is about a teacher who was helping one of her kindergarten students put on his cowboy boots. He asked for help and she could see why. Even with her pulling and him pushing, the little boots still didn't want to go on. By the time the second boot

was on, the teacher had worked up a sweat. She almost cried when the little boy said, "Teacher, they're on the wrong feet." She looked and sure enough, they were.

It wasn't any easier pulling the boots off than it was putting them on. She managed to keep her cool as together they worked to get the boots back on, this time on the right feet. The little guy then announced, "These aren't my boots."

The teacher bit her tongue rather than get right in his face and scream, "Why didn't you say so?" like she wanted to. And, once again she struggled to help him pull the ill-fitting boots off his little feet.

No sooner had they got the boots off and he said, "They're my brother's boots. My Mom made me wear 'em."

Now she didn't know if she should laugh or cry. But, she mustered up the grace and courage she had left to wrestle the boots on his feet again. Helping him into his coat, she asked, "Now, where are your mittens?"

He said, "I stuffed 'em in the toes of my boots."

According to the story, the teacher's trial starts next month. (1)

It's hard for any of us at any age to be patient. Whether we are a child or a teacher or a common variety human being, patience is difficult. Particularly when we are in a time of stress.

There was a delightful little story in a recent *Reader's Digest* from Mrs. Nolen Cash of Lonoke, Arkansas. Mrs. Cash said that with the due date approaching for the birth of their first child, her husband was becoming increasingly fidgety.

One evening she told her husband that she was having some slight pains, but she assured him that they were not serious. Later, she was in the den, relaxing, when she heard her fidgety husband shaving. Then he began to throw on his clothes.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

With great exasperation he said, "You can sit here if you want to, but I'm going to the hospital!" I don't know whether the very pregnant Mrs. Cash accompanied her husband to the hospital or not, but it's hard to be patient.

It's especially hard at Christmas. Remember how difficult it was when you were small to wait to see what wonderful gifts Santa would bring? Anyone ever peek through the closets to try to get an advanced view? It's hard to be patient. It may be even more difficult to be patient if you are a parent seeking to corral the right toy for your children's Christmas.

It would seem that one of the most dangerous places to be this time of year is Wal-Mart particularly on Black Friday, the day stores traditionally kick off the Christmas shopping frenzy. You may remember a few years ago on Black Friday in Orange City, Florida when a mob of shoppers at a Wal-Mart store rushing for a sale on DVD players trampled the first woman in line and knocked her unconscious as they scrambled for the shelves. When paramedics arrived they found the woman lying on top of the twenty-nine dollar player surrounded by shoppers oblivious to her plight.

Eventually, she was taken to a hospital where she made full recovery. (2) Not everyone is that lucky.

In 2008 a Wal-Mart employee in Long Island was trampled to death by an out-of-control mob on Black Friday. Roughly two thousand people had gathered outside the doors in the predawn darkness. Chanting "Push the doors in!" the crowd pressed against the glass, as the clock ticked down to the 5 a.m. opening. When it was time, the Black Friday stampede plunged the store into chaos, knocking employees to the ground and sending some shoppers scurrying on top of vending machines to avoid the danger. When the madness ended, a thirty-four-year-old

employee was dead and four shoppers, including a twenty-eight-year-old pregnant woman, had to be taken to the hospital. (3)

Sometimes the words, “Be patient” are of vital importance.

It’s interesting that the writer of James used the Old Testament prophets as an example of patience. “Brothers and sisters,” he writes, “as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.”

One of the prophets he surely had in mind was the prophet Isaiah. We dealt with one of Isaiah’s prophecies about the coming Messiah last week. Listen again to another of Isaiah’s prophecies about what lay ahead for his people. He writes,

“The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the Lord, the splendor of our God.

“Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, ‘Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.’

“Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow. And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness; it will be for those who walk on that Way. The unclean will not journey on it; wicked fools will not go about on it. No lion will be there, nor any ravenous beast; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there, and those the Lord has rescued will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.”

As we noted last week, Isaiah was writing at a time of deep devastation for the people of Judah, and yet he paints a picture of an idyllic future, a future that we await even now. Notice the beauty of that vision.

The land will be completely restored, transformed into a Garden of Eden. The soil will be filled with rich nutrients, and the vegetation will blossom so much that it will seem to break forth in shouts of joy and rejoicing. The glory of Lebanon is a reference to the fragrant cedar forests of that land. Carmel was known for its mighty oaks, and Sharon for its beautiful pastures and lush, green pastureland.

In that day, says Isaiah, the glory and splendor of God will be seen by all the people of the earth. As a result of this total transformation, the whole earth will be filled with the beauty of nature, with the radiance and majesty of God.

Even those who are weak and fearful can look ahead to this glorious future with great anticipation, says Isaiah. All who are disabled will be healed and restored to health. All the blind will be able to see, and all the deaf will be able to hear. Those who are lame will leap like deer, and the mute those who cannot speak will shout out for joy.

Water, that most scarce of commodities in a desert region, will flow both in the wilderness and in the desert. Streams and rivers will flow abundantly across the face of the earth. Pools will replace desert sand, and springs will bubble up out of ground that had lacked rain. Vegetation will grow everywhere, on all land that had formerly been ruined or barren. And through it all will run a very special highway, a highway that will be known as the Way of Holiness.

In Isaiah's day traveling along the roads was often dangerous. There were ferocious animals, thieves, and natural obstacles such as deep ravines and narrow paths on the sides of hills. But when the Messiah comes, says Isaiah, the highway of holiness will be perfectly safe. There will be no wicked persons or ferocious animals to endanger the life of the traveler. In short, the kingdom of God is coming to this earth, says the prophet, and when it does, the earth will become a perfect utopia. It is a magnificent picture of a perfect world.

Of course, much of Isaiah's writing is poetry. We don't know how much of his imagery is to be taken literally. But here is what we need to see. Christmas is about the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies. **Christmas is about God's redemptive plan of salvation.** Christmas isn't about a house so lit up you can see it from space, or about giving or receiving the biggest and best gift money can buy. It isn't about eating succulent ham or turkey. It's not about spending time with family, as precious as that may be. It isn't even about celebrating an infant's birth in a manger. Did you catch that? Christmas isn't even ultimately about celebrating an infant's birth in a manger. Christmas is about the fulfillment of God's redemptive plan of salvation.

God has a plan for our world a plan that extends from creation to the cross, from the empty tomb to eternity. God is at work bringing in a perfect world a world where all people will live in harmony and dignity together as children of God a world where that which is broken will be made whole a world of peace, joy and love. Sure, the babe in the manger is an important part of that plan, and it is right and good that we celebrate his birth. But Christmas is but a part of the entire Christ event. It is not only about the coming of Christ, but it is also about the coming of God's Kingdom when Christ shall reign as King of Kings and Lord of Lords forever and ever. This is not humanity's dream, but God's dream, a world in which all people will live in perfect harmony together. Human beings have made many attempts at building a perfect world a utopia, but none have been successful.

Maybe you are aware of a recent scientific attempt called Biosphere 2. It's an amazing story. Biosphere 2 was designed back in the 1980s to be a self-sustaining world. Four men and four women were sealed for two years in a palatial three-acre glass and steel structure outside Oracle, Arizona. This large terrarium boasted a rain forest; a savanna, a coral reef, a marsh, and a miniature ocean. Here, in a sealed environment, the eight people were to live together in harmony with the environment.

Unfortunately, says one observer, "living inside the sealed habitat proved to be much more difficult than originally thought. Sixteen months into the twenty-four month mission, oxygen levels inside the facility had dropped so low that additional oxygen needed to be pumped in. Difficulties in growing food forced the crew to open their reserve food supplies. Disagreements over the focus of the project caused the Biospherians to split into two separate groups which avoided each other, much like the tribes in William Golding's classic novel *Lord of the Flies*." (4) The project was abandoned.

Biosphere 2 still lives on as a tourist attraction and as a research facility of the University of Arizona. It was not a failure scientifically. Much was learned from this experiment. But do not be misled. No utopian dream of humanity will ever completely succeed. Why? Because human beings themselves are flawed creatures. Flawed creatures can never create a perfect world. Only a perfect God can create a perfect world. And that is what Christmas is about. The child born in Bethlehem of Judea will one day rule over creation. And he will rule with perfect love. No longer will we ask "what would Jesus do?" for his law of love will be written upon our hearts.

And here is the good news of the day you and I can be part of that perfect kingdom. As we spread the good news of God's love for all people, we become part of the creation of this new heaven and this new earth. On no other foundation can the Kingdom of God be built. Are you ready to do your part today?

1. Pastor David Maffett, <http://www.faith-lutheran.ca/feb15-04.html>.
2. Stephen P. Bauman, <http://www.christchurchnyc.org/ser/a/joy.html>.
3. Mike Slaughter, *Christmas Is Not Your Birthday* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011).
4. Trevor Freeman, <http://www.trevorland.com/words/biosphere-2-a-successful-failure/>.