

4th Sunday of Advent “How to Have a Blessed Christmas”

Bishop Frank Schuster

The fourth Sunday of Advent always comes at the darkest time of the year. How many hours of daylight do we have right now? Something like eight hours? It is depressing to think about. What I enjoy doing sometimes to lift my spirits this time of year is to drive around and look at Christmas lights. Do any of you do that? You know, if you go online and search for funny Christmas lights display, some of them will really make you laugh, like a light display of Santa getting stuck in the chimney or a mishap or two involving reindeer. My favorite one was of two houses side by side. One house was manically decorated with a magical display taking up every inch of grass out front. The other house made an arrow with lights pointing to that neighbor with a sign that said “Ditto”. I thought that was funny anyway.

However, anthropologically speaking, I think there is something very right about the instinct we have of putting festive lights everywhere this time of year, especially the ones with religious themes. It almost feels like an act of defiance against the darkness. One of the side benefits of Christmas as we all know is that every day that follows has a little more light in it, thanks be to God, a few more minutes each and every day. And somehow celebrating the birthday of the light of the world at Christmas this time of year makes real sense. What this says is, even though life can get dark, God will give us the light we need each and every day if we stay close to him. A relationship with Jesus does that.

My friends, we all have darkness to contend with this time of year, whether it is worries about our family, concerns regarding our job, the grief that comes from losing a loved one, a health concern we have about ourselves or with a family member, or simply the spiritual darkness that comes from doubt. I find this Gospel reading from St. Matthew to be such good medicine because it reminds us in Technicolor that the first Christmas was not easy either. The Gospel says, “This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child through the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man, yet unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly.” That is how the first Christmas started. Just think how horrible that moment was for everyone. Think at how awful everyone must have felt. Thank God an angel came to let Joseph know that taking Mary as his wife was God’s will for him and to be not afraid. However, the Gospel of Matthew continues by telling us that, after Jesus’ birth, the Holy Family had to flee to Egypt because King Herod was after them. The message seems to underscore that the first Christmas was hard.

And, if we are honest with ourselves, not all of our Christmases each year are easy. And, as much as we like to wish everyone a Merry Christmas, this can be a tall order for some people. On the other hand, the Gospel challenges us to consider that no matter how dark life can be sometimes, each and every one of us can have a truly blessed Christmas if we realize that celebrating Christmas makes no sense at all without our Easter hope. Let that thought sit there on your mind a little bit because it isn’t always intuitive to think of Easter this time of year. However, please consider that if Jesus was not triumphant over the darkness of death on Easter morning, there would be no reason to celebrate Christmas at all. There would really be no point.

That is certainly what St. Paul is arguing in our second reading this weekend. He writes about Jesus being a descendent of David in the flesh but also the Son of God “according to the Spirit of holiness through the resurrection from the dead.” See it? What St. Paul is saying is the incarnation we celebrate at Christmas has absolutely no point to it without our Easter hope.

Brass tacks, we don't celebrate Christmas because Jesus was an intriguing historical figure or because he was a remarkable philosopher. We celebrate Christmas because Jesus is our Savior. Jesus is truly Emmanuel, a word that means, “God is with us”. The very name Jesus is a word that literally means “God saves”. It is our Easter hope that compels us to celebrate the birthday of our Lord every year. Like I said at the beginning, even though the fourth Sunday of Advent always comes at the darkest time of the year, when Christmas comes around it feels right that every day that follows has a little more light in it, each and every day. A relationship with Jesus does that. Jesus is the light we need to navigate the darkness.

What this means is, whether we are merry or not this year, our Christmas can be truly blessed if we stay close to Jesus because the light of Christ triumphs over whatever darkness can be thrown at us. St. Bernard of Clairvaux understood this. He had a wonderful insight about Christmas in a beautiful prayer he composed in the 11th century, during the time of history historians call the Dark Ages. I think St. Bernard's prayer is helpful on this the fourth Sunday of Advent. Consider his words. He prays, “Let your goodness, Lord, appear to us, that we, made in your image, may conform ourselves to it. In our own strength we cannot image your majesty, power and wonder; nor is it fitting for us to try. But your mercy reaches from the heavens, through the clouds, to the earth below. You have brought us the greatest of all gifts, the gift of your eternal love. Caress us with your tiny hands, embrace us with your tiny arms, and pierce our hearts with your soft, sweet cries.”

My friends, we have lit the fourth candle. The birthday of our savior is near.