

And the angel said, "Do not be afraid, for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people: for to you is born this day a Savior who is the Messiah, the Lord!"

We gather together this Christmas Eve, no doubt with a lot of relief. The pressure filled days of preparations and shopping, of battling crowds in the stores and cars on the streets are over. Christmas is here! But lest we relax too quickly – for many there is still traveling to be done and meals to cook and relatives and friends to visit. Not to mention the fact that Santa still has to do his thing! But the thing about Santa Claus is that Santa would have us believe that Christmas is about good behavior - and good behavior is not always easy to come by.

There was a priest who was walking down the street one day when he noticed a very small boy trying to press the doorbell on a house across the street. However, the boy was too short, and the doorbell was way above his head and he just couldn't reach it. After watching the boy's efforts for a moment, the priest steps across the street, walks up behind the little guy and says, "Son, let me help". He places one hand kindly on the boy's shoulder, and with the other gives the doorbell a solid ring. Crouching down to the child's level, the priest smiles benevolently and asks, "Is there anything else I can do, my little man?" To which the little boy replies, "Yes, now we run like Hell!" Yes, good behavior is not easy to come by.

I have a 4 year old niece named Natalie who is lovable as can be, but mischievous as all hell – she is constantly in trouble, at home and at preschool. The only 4 or 5 year old I know that got into more trouble at that age was me! At that age, when I wanted to get out of kindergarten early so I could walk home instead of taking the bus –I would successfully forge my parents signatures on a note to the school! Yes, at 5 years old I was already forging signatures - just normal behavior for any Italian, NY kid - who wanted to become a priest.

Anyway, we received a picture of Natalie the other day and she had on a T-shirt with a Christmas saying on it that said, "Dear Santa – I can explain!!" I can explain...I just loved it - in one way, very delightful – but in another it way gets to the heart of what the problem is with Santa Claus's message about Christmas.

Santa Claus would have us believe that Christmas is all about good behavior. If that were really the case – we would all be without a savior. Most of us have lived long enough to realize that life is not always fair. Life has not always offered us what we thought we deserved – it has not always rewarded our good behavior - and for that matter, sometimes - life doesn't punish us for our bad behavior.

No Christmas is not about our behavior – Christmas is about God's saving action! And so Jesus is born tonight, right into the middle of our joys, sorrows and our all of our behavior – both good and bad. God comes into our lives – bringing God's presence, love and grace - no matter what.

Many people think that not much has changed since Jesus' time. But look more closely at "then" and "now". "Then" there were atrocities – Herod went on a rampage after Christ's birth and killed all the first-born he could find. "Then", wars were prevalent as the Romans sought to conquer their world. "Then" life was filled with rejection and betrayal – just look at Judas' betrayal and the disciple's desertion of Jesus. "Then" relationships often fell apart as evidenced by Jesus talking about the divorce laws of his day. And "Then" Jesus had a prominent healing ministry because people were tragically sick and most died of disease well before they got to old age.

Today is not much different - we see similar atrocities, wars, broken relationships, illness and death. We may have more sophisticated technology, medicine and science – but sin and tragedy is as prevalent now as it was then. Some may even wonder - what has the birth of Jesus accomplished???

One of the things Heidi and I like to do at this time of the year– is to sit on the couch together, crying, as we watch some sappy Christmas show or movie. And we were doing just that last weekend watching the “Christmas Angel”. It wasn’t even a good movie – some dying rich guy was being a generous secret Santa to those in need. But it was sappy and we cried anyway. What did catch my attention was one conversation in the movie:

The main character says to another, “Everyone needs to know that someone cares. All we want is to be loved unconditionally.” The other character wisely responds, “But that’s not easy to come by”. But the main character points out, “Yes, that’s true, but it’s not impossible.”

Tonight in the birth of Jesus God makes the unlikely - and the not easy to come by – not only possible, but a wonderful reality each and every day. The message in the birth of Christ is that - regardless of who else in our life cares – one thing is very certain – God *always* does! And whenever *we* practice forgiveness, sharing, giving another chance, or unwavering love - we keep the Christmas spirit of God’s caring alive!

I was watching TV the other night and this commercial flashed across the screen – of course I thank God for DVR because I was able to just rewind it to write it down! In big letters the word “believe” kept flashing all over the screen. And then the announcer said.

Believe – in being treated like a human being

Believe – that bedside manner matters.

Believe – your life is in someone’s hands – and they won’t drop you.

Believe – that community stands for something again.

Now it doesn’t matter who sponsored the commercial – but what does matter is that it would make a great commercial for Christianity. Because believing in the birth of Christ means that we *believe* in respecting and treating all people like human beings. We *believe* in being compassionate to others. We *believe* that God will not drop us – Christ is always there. And we *believe* that community matters – because where 2 or 3 are gathered together Christ is in the midst of us, as he is this Christmas evening in the bread and wine we share. Jesus does make a difference. And our *believing* – our faith – also makes a difference.

Randy Dales, a good friend of mine and one of my favorite priests, recently wrote about the common religious saying, “Restore us O Lord” – which is often said or sung in many church prayers. He writes, “ ‘Restore us O Lord’ is just a way of asking God to take us back to the way we would like to remember things. But that’s not how God works. God *renews*, God doesn’t restore. God makes us ready to see the new things that God is doing. God leads us into the future, not into the past.

Now God did not go through all that trouble in Jesus’ birth on Christmas morning so that people would just be the same and continue on in our old habits and destructive ways. The birth of Jesus is about a change of heart – it is about hope – it is about the need for love and forgiveness to keep working and finding new ways to overcome evil and greed. The evil and darkness of our world always threatens to overcome the light – but with the light of Christ in our hearts and minds we can face our challenges with hope and laughter and joy.

In the middle of a world in which the external realities may not seem very different from yesterday, last year, or 2000 years ago – let us make sure that our internal realities – our hearts, minds, faiths and attitudes – are very much different and changed for the better.

Of course - Christmas will only be what we want to make it. But as we leave this celebration tonight, let us go forth into the realities of our worlds – renewed, inspired and energized - to help Christ be born into every relationship and every circumstance – so that we can participate in God’s transforming power to make this world a new and better place. For we will have finally learned the meaning of Christmas when Christmas indeed becomes a way of life.