

*When the angels went away from them to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go, then, to Bethlehem to see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."*

- Luke 2:15

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Once again, we come together to celebrate the Nativity of Our Lord. I would like to welcome all of our visitors and our young parishioners who are home for Christmas from school and those who may be joining us virtually. We are blessed that you are here. To our visitors, we would like you to know that if you are looking for a spiritual home, you are most welcome here at St. Pius.

This has been a challenging year, to say the least. At one time or another, I am sure that each of us has felt alone, afraid, doubtful, angry, or sad. Many of us have felt all these emotions. Yet, as with generations over the millennia, scripture calls to us "Emmanuel" – God is with us! Not a magical God who does tricks for our entertainment but a miraculous God, who, as Pope Francis has said, "comes as a child to attract us with love, to touch our hearts with his humble goodness, to draw attention through his poverty to those who worry about accumulating the false treasures of the world." No waving of a wand...no bright lights and glitter... no groups of people gathered around in loud celebration. Instead, the miraculous incarnation of God was greeted in a humble manger, with only Mary and Joseph. God did not come to mankind for a quick magic trick. God came to live among mankind, then and now, to teach us and to remain with us.

This is what one of the most beloved traditions at Christmas, the Nativity scene, can teach us. Looking deeply at the people represented in the scene helps to remind us of the many ways that God has guided his people in the past and continues to guide us now.

In the Nativity scene, Mary, the Mother of God, is depicted kneeling next to the newborn Jesus. Mary, who was struck with fear at the appearance of the angel Gabriel when it was announced to her that she would bear the Son of God. Mary, who would have certainly understood that being with child before marriage was punishable by death. Mary, who, by humbly saying, "I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word," accepted the call to serve God and all of humanity, despite her fear. During this time, she also accepted the call to visit her relative Elizabeth, to serve her. *May we be inspired by Mary to serve others through our own time of fear and challenge.*

Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus, was filled with doubts about his intended wife, who was with child although he and Mary had not had relations. He was ready to quietly send Mary away, to divorce her, as was his right. However, in a dream described in the Gospel of Matthew (1:20), an angel of the Lord visited Joseph and instructed him to take Mary as his wife. Rather than defending his legal rights, Joseph listened to God, sacrificing his reputation in the community, quietly fulfilling God's call. Joseph was a man who was deeply attuned to God and attentive to the messages he received in the quiet depths of his heart. *May we be inspired by Joseph to listen attentively for the voice of God in our own lives and humbly fulfill God's call.*

Near the manger, we see the shepherds, to whom the angels heralded the birth of Christ. These lowly members of social standing were the first to hear the good news, the first to see the Savior of the World in Bethlehem, and, upon leaving and returning to their flocks, the first to spread the joyful word of the birth of Son of God. It is significant that God chose the lowly and not those with worldly power and fame to be the first to hear and share the glorious news of the birth of the Messiah. *May we be inspired by the shepherds to have the courage to announce the good news of Christ.*

Finally, at some point during the Christmas season, the Magi appear in the scene. Traditionally, we see three. The Gospel of Matthew tells us that the Magi came from the East and, while passing through Jerusalem, attracted the attention of King Herod who requested that, upon their return, they inform Herod of the exact location of the Messiah. After finding the Christ-child and paying him homage, the Magi were warned in a

dream not to return to Herod. Heeding the voice of God, the wise men chose between the commands of the kind and the command of God and returned to their homeland by another route. *May we be inspired by the wise men to carefully discern between worldly glory and God's glory.*

We see in the Nativity scene that God came to all people, the poor and the forgotten, the Jews and the Gentiles. All of them heard the word of God. Now, as we journey through this Christmas of the pandemic, may we, like Mary, serve one another by wearing masks and carefully maintaining a distance of at least six feet between us. (Even the Magi covered their faces to stay healthy in the desert!) Like Joseph, may we be tuned to the voice of God and pray for others throughout the world. Pope Francis calls this act of receiving and transmitting being "God's antenna". Like the shepherds, may we share the story of Christ's birth with everyone around us, drawing them nearer to the Christ child. Finally, like the Magi, may we carefully discern between celebrating a "magical" Christmas, with its emphasis on commercial obligations, and the miraculous Christmas, focused on the birth of our Savior and salvation of all mankind.

May we who believe in the miracle of Christmas also see the incarnation of God in those who are poor and forsaken, those who are sick and those who mourn loved ones, those who courageously work on the frontlines of this pandemic.

May Emmanuel nurture our bodies, minds, and spirits through the Eucharist each Sunday, and bring us God's great gift of peace on Earth, goodwill to all, and eternal life with Christ.

Merry Christmas!

Fr. Paw Lwin, Pastor