

Pastor's Christmas Homily – 2017

Merry Christmas! I'd like to begin with a little segway into the Christmas homily. ... Everybody's concerned about safety and security. And recently a study was done looking into the safest place to be in our troubled world. The study is called "Statistics Don't Lie." The point of the research project was to address the question: "How do you Stay SAFE in the World Today? WHERE is the safest place to be?" Here are the findings:

1. Avoid riding in automobiles because they are responsible for 20% of all fatal accidents.
2. Do not stay home because 17% of all accidents occur in the home.
3. Avoid walking on streets or sidewalks because 114% of all accidents occur to pedestrians.
4. Avoid traveling by air, rail, or water because 16% of all accidents involve these forms of transportation.
5. Of the remaining 33%, 32% of all deaths occur in hospitals. So above all else, avoid hospitals!

But, you'll be pleased to learn that only 1% of all deaths occur in worship services in church, and these are usually related to previous physical disorders. Therefore, logic tells us that the safest place for you to be at any given point in time is at church! Attend church! It will save your life!

So – it's good to know statistically we're in a safe place. And, on behalf of all who serve here, I welcome our regular parishioners and all our visitors from near and far who come home (or come back) for this Christmas Mass. Maybe you're here because you're giving a gift (you doing a favor) for a loved one who has asked you to come. If so, you're really here because God has called you here directly – through someone else's invitation. It's possible that some folks are here reluctantly because you may feel hurt by (or angry at) God in some way, (due to a loss, or situation beyond your control); or, disenchanted and alienated from the church. Certainly there can be many valid reasons in life to have those feelings about God and/or the church. Sometimes I have the same reactions myself. But you're here (we're all here) because, like Mary and Joseph 2000 years ago, "God has us right where He wants to have us," ready again to be open a little bit more to newness of life by the presence of God-With-Us through the Mystery of Christmas. So, welcome home!

For a Christmas homily, I always try to relate a story or an event of the past year - a recent news flash, a book or a movie - something to make a practical connection to the message and meaning of Christmas. This year, I'd like to focus on a movie with a Christmas message. There are always a lot of films that come out at this time of the year to attract people to the theater. So, there's the new Star Wars movie – The Last Jedi – which has nothing to do with Christmas, but there's also a beautiful movie called "STAR," which is an animated version of the Nativity.

The one movie I did see is the one I'd like to suggest that you see. I think it has a real, contemporary message of Christmas and a subtle affirmation of incarnation. The movie is called *Wonder*, with Julia Roberts as one of the stars. *Wonder* is based on the bestselling children's novel of the same title. It's the story of Auggie Pullman, a boy with significant facial deformities caused by a rare genetic condition, who enters middle school after years of home schooling. As he makes friends, faces bullying, and makes it through the gauntlet of fifth grade, the film illustrates the perspectives of Auggie, his classmates, his older sister and other characters, offering a sympathetic look at the inner world of teens and tweens alike.

Prior to beginning middle school, Auggie only left his home after he put on an "astronaut" helmet – so that his facial deformities might not cause people to stare at him. He felt he had to hide himself for fear of rejection and what he perceived as ugliness. His parents try to convince him of his inner goodness and beauty. Auggie thinks meeting kids is harder than meeting adults, because kids aren't as good as hiding their reactions.

Some of the lines in the movie I think can connect to the Mystery of the Incarnation. On the first day of school, Auggie's mom prays to herself: "please God, help them to be nice to my son." In the beginning the kids weren't too kind. And you know, in fact, 2000 years ago, they weren't always kind and nice to the Son of God right from get-go: from the threats of King Herod to the "holier than thou" religious folks to Pontius Pilate. It's the reality of human life. Christmas doesn't deny or hide that predictability of living in this world.

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At one point in the film, one of Auggie’s friends says: “Why don’t you have plastic surgery so you can look normal?” Auggie points to his own face, looks at the kid and says, “**This** is after surgery! It takes a lot of work to look this good!” Well, it often does take a lot of work, even when we appear attractive on the outside, to feel good about the inside - the inside of ourselves; the inside of our families; our country, our church. Jesus is born in Bethlehem and becomes like us in all things – but sin. It does take a lot of work, with or without outside interventions, to accept and embrace who God made us to be – for His purpose. And the reality of the Incarnation is that God becomes a human person – to show us what God thinks about humanity.

In the movie, *Wonder*, Auggie’s mom, played by Julia Roberts, also plays the role of a “wisdom figure,” inviting the audience to reflection and introspection: She says to Auggie at one point: you’re going to feel like you’re all alone, but you’re not. Later she says: “You’re not ugly.” And he says back to her, “You have to say that because you’re my mom.” And she says back, “You can’t blend in when you’re born to stand out.” These words are profound connections to the Incarnation. Our culture so often tells us that we’re not attractive (indeed that we’re ugly) if we don’t look or dress like so and so; or that we’re less a person because we don’t have this or that (these or those) material possessions.

“Christmas Day is a birthday, just like any other. And, it’s a birthday quite unlike any other. For it is the birthday of all of us. On Christmas Day, a whole supernatural family came to birth.” Christmas shows us what God thinks about us. It all comes down to that. It’s really that simple.

The question is: what do we think about ourselves? On Christmas we acknowledge and celebrate our distinctive diversity and our common humanity. The Incarnation is the empowerment of our humanity. Every single person, “*created in the image and likeness of God*” has the very same opportunity, invitation and mandate to maximize the potential within us despite whatever limitations we have – physically, materially, emotionally or spiritually. Do we look for affirmation in what God has done within us, or do we desire to be someone else? When we try to play a role that’s not meant for us, we fail. Christmas shows us → that God sees humanity the way Michelangelo approached a block of granite – seeing the person inside and chipping away everything else.

As I thought about the movie, *Wonder*, it reminded me about the song and the story of Rudolph The Red-Nosed Reindeer. Have you ever really listened to story and the lyrics of that song? Rudolph was an outcast. He was like the other reindeer – but different. There was a facial difference – a bright red nose that stood out. “All of the other reindeer used to laugh and call him names. They never let poor Rudolph join in any reindeer games.” “But then one foggy Christmas Eve, Santa” comes, or rather – Christmas comes - and, through the “**wonder**” (and the real meaning) of Christmas, how does Rudolph – all of a sudden – appear ??? As a light (leading and shining) on Christmas Eve, bringing us gifts and “going down in history” for his uniqueness! “You can’t blend in – when you’re meant to stand out.”

There’s an old Christian tradition that God sends each person into this world with a special message to deliver; with a special song to play for others; with a special act of love to bestow. No one else can speak my message or sing my song or offer my act of love. Those gifts have been entrusted only to me. And you have yours!

God has a unique plan for each unique person of WONDER. That’s the task for today and the New Year ahead as we “come home” (and head home) for Christmas 2017. So, this is a safe place to come [to church], not because of any elaborate security system, but because we have the best “homeland security” arrangement in place. Our “homeland security” is the belief, the trust, the assurance, the conviction and the “wonder” that “God Is With Us”. We’re a whole lot ‘safer’ knowing (and **trusting in** that! And, we’re a whole lot better off appreciating the WONDER of ourselves (created in the image and likeness of God) and the WONDER of the family and friends that God has placed in our lives. Merry Christmas!