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A homily for the The Nativity of the Lord (Midnight)

Date: Wednesday, December 25, 2024 | **Season:** Christmas | **Year:** C

First Reading: Isaiah 9:1–6

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 96:1–3, 11–13 | **Response:** Luke 2:11

Second Reading: Titus 2:11–14

Gospel Acclamation: Luke 2:10–11

Gospel Reading: Luke 2:1–14

Preached at: the Jesuit Institute in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa.

Tonight, we gather in joyful anticipation, standing on the threshold of a profound mystery that brings beings from heaven and earth to rejoice—from angels to shepherds, from kings to lowly animals. This is the night when the eternal promise of salvation takes flesh, the night when the Word becomes one of us and dwells among us. It is the night, after all the long nights of pain, suffering, and anguish, when God decides to become human to be among us, so that none of us will ever be alone again.

Our Gospel from Luke recounts the cherished story of Jesus' birth. Mary and Joseph journey to Bethlehem in obedience to the census decree of Caesar Augustus, only to find no place in the inn. In the quiet of a humble stable, the Savior of the world is born and laid in a manger. This moment, though wrapped in simplicity, is nothing less than the fulfillment of God's promise to us, a beacon of hope and joy for all humanity.

The angel announces to the shepherds, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David, a Savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord.” This proclamation, filled with hope, reminds us that the birth of Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s promise to redeem and restore His people.

This evening, the Church around the world is also beginning the Jubilee Year of 2025, with its theme of “Pilgrims of Hope.” This Christmas Eve is a time for us to reflect on our own journey of faith. Mary and Joseph’s journey to Bethlehem was marked by trust in God’s plan, even in uncertainty. The shepherds, too, embarked on a journey, leaving behind their flocks to seek the child in the manger. Their paths echo the call of every Christian: to walk in hope, trusting that God’s light will guide us even through the darkest valleys. We might ask ourselves: What are the guiding lights or stars in our lives? To whom do we direct our gaze and focus? Is it towards God or towards His created things? In what do we put our faith? Can we learn to trust again, like a little child?

The Jubilee is a time to renew our commitment to this pilgrimage, recognizing that we are all journeying toward the fullness of God’s kingdom. The birth of Jesus is a reminder that our journey is not solitary; God walks with us. His name, Immanuel—“God with us”—is a promise that transforms every step of our path.

The manger, a feeding trough for animals, foreshadows the Eucharist, where Christ offers Himself as the Bread of Life, nourishing us with His love and presence. Just as the shepherds knelt before the manger in awe, we are invited to kneel before the altar, recognizing that the same Jesus who was born in Bethlehem—a word that literally means “house of bread”—comes to us in the Eucharist, sustaining us for the journey ahead.

This holy night also reminds us of God’s faithfulness through history. The world into which Jesus was born was marked by darkness—oppression under Roman rule, the memories of exile, the struggles of ordinary people, and the longing for a Messiah. The angel’s message of “peace on earth to those on whom His favor

rests” speaks to a world still yearning for light, hope, and peace. It was not a peace like the “pax Romana,” enforced by armies, but an entirely different peace, one that always begins and ends with peaceful hearts and minds.

For the past four weeks of Advent, we have prepared our hearts for this moment, lighting candles to push back the darkness and proclaiming the coming of the true Light. Now, like the shepherds, we are called to respond with joy. They did not keep the good news to themselves but went forth, proclaiming what they had seen and heard. This is our mission as well: to share the light of Christ with a world that longs for hope. Who will we share this good news with tonight? Perhaps there’s someone we haven’t spoken with in a while, or someone we haven’t forgiven in our hearts. We can begin this jubilee by reaching out and offering that mercy, just as we have received it countless times from the Lord.

I invite everyone present here tonight to join us as we receive Communion this Christmas, remembering that the Eucharist is not a prize for the perfect, but medicine for the weak. As you receive communion this evening, allow the encounter with Christ to fortify your hope and heal you. For tonight, in Rome, the Church begins the Jubilee of 2025 with the opening of the Holy Doors of St. Peter’s Basilica. The Holy Father is inviting us towards hope, especially in finding hope amidst the signs of the times in which we live, and in our shared desire for peace in the world. Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, is with us tonight. We earnestly pray that He will be with the suffering in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan, and the many places that need peace.

Furthermore, Pope Francis asks us to find hope in our own lives, living as witnesses to hope for the imprisoned, the sick, the young and old, the migrants, and the exiles around us. We can begin this process by encouraging our family and friends. Tonight, our hopes become real as we celebrate the birth of the hope of the world. Let us make Pope Francis’ words our own. He echoes Psalm 27 when he says:

“Through our witness, may hope spread to all those who anxiously seek it. May the way we live our lives say to them in so many words: ‘Hope in the Lord! Hold firm, take heart and hope in the Lord!’” (Psalm 27:14).

May the power of hope fill our days as we celebrate the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ this Christmas, to whom be praise and glory, now and forever.

As we celebrate this Christmas, may we embrace our identity as pilgrims of hope, walking with trust in God's promises. Let us draw near to the manger with awe and wonder, recognizing that this child is the fulfillment of all our longings. And as we journey toward the Jubilee of 2025, may we be inspired to live as witnesses to the light and hope of Christ.

Tonight, the angels' song—"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests"—becomes our song. Let us carry it in our hearts and proclaim it with our lives.

Amen.

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