

Merry Christmas, everyone. Thank you all for being here today as we gather as a church family. It doesn't matter if you're just passing through, if you've come back to town to be with relatives, if you're here for the first time, or here for the first time in a long time – this is a place where everyone belongs. If you are new to us, let me give you my little spiel of our parish – we are a group of sinners, each and every one of us. If you're not a sinner, I invite you to find another parish because you're going to make the rest of us feel bad about ourselves. None of us are in a position to judge anyone else, because we are all in need of God's mercy. The reason we are here is because we have found that mercy in the message of Jesus Christ. If that sounds like the kind of parish you could call home, please know you are always welcome here, this is a place where you belong.

This has been a season of good news for our parish. Just these past few weeks, we've had some big developments about the immediate future of St. Gabriel's. Our convent building, which has been vacant and unused these last ten years, will once again house a religious order. The Handmaids of the Heart of Jesus are going to move into the building in the fall of 2020 and minister in our parish and in Holy Family in St. Louis Park. They are a group of sisters who are young – the oldest member is my classmate from college and also the mother superior – and what strikes people the first time they meet them is how joyful they are. I can't wait for

you all to meet them – they are going to be at our Masses in three weeks, and you'll get a taste for the great blessing they are going to be for our parish life.

And our school building here at St. Joseph campus that has been vacant for the past two years will once again house a Catholic school this fall. Chesterton Academy is a Catholic high school that has been looking for a home in a Catholic parish, and we are blessed to be in a position to offer one to them. Among other things, in addition to the 30 people at our daily Mass, we will add 140 teenagers, worshipping with us and bringing their energy and youthfulness to our grounds.

We have reason to be hopeful here at the parish, which is fitting for the Christmas season. I am glad that these announcements have come at this time of year. That is what we want the Christmas season to be, right? We want it to be a season of hope and gladness. In fact, we may even feel pressure to feel that way. That is the expectation that many of us feel we have to live up to if we're going to be in the "Christmas spirit," right? Life is good, everyone is happy, sugar plum fairies and it's a wonderful life.

It is a great blessing if we do genuinely feel that way, don't get me wrong, but it is important for us to realize that that isn't the reality for everyone. For some, just the demands of this season can wear us down. For many of you this has been a hectic, crazy season that's finally coming to an end. Christmas can feel more like a

deadline in which we have to get everything done, rather than a holiday to celebrate. Just meeting the expectations of family and friends, the responsibility of getting everything the way we think it's supposed to be sometimes doesn't feel very good, doesn't bring us joy. Maybe you look forward to just getting it over with, getting back to your routine, and that is completely understandable.

For others, the difficulty of getting into the "Christmas spirit" is even deeper. Perhaps there is an empty seat at the table because you've suffered a loss, or because someone is estranged from the rest of the family. Perhaps you are estranged from your family, because of something you've done, or something they've done to you. Perhaps memories of painful Christmases in the past come up at this time every year that you'd just as soon forget. Again, don't get me wrong, it is a great blessing if you do genuinely love this time of year and look forward to Christmas, but we recognize that that isn't the reality for everyone.

If this is a difficult time of year for you, you are actually more in line with the first Christmas, and are more like those who first received the good news. Those that we hear about in the story of Bethlehem were not full of joyful anticipation, reminiscing about happy memories; no, they were pretty much miserable. The shepherds who are stuck with the job of tending to the sheep in an open field in the middle of the night while everyone else slept were not joyful. The travelers who had to uproot their lives for the census because Caesar Augustus decided he

wanted to know how many people he had at his disposal, which could only mean trouble for the common person, were not joyful. Mary and Joseph, who could find no compassion from others as they desperately looked for a place where Mary could deliver her child – these are the ones that we hear about in the story of Christmas, and they were not in a good place.

So it is significant to us today that *they* were the ones who received the good news – not the church people, not the people comfortable in their homes with food in their bellies, not the well-educated or elite – it was those who were suffering, those who were in a situation they didn't want to be in, who first received the good news.

And what was the good news that they received? What was the light that shined in their darkness? The angel said 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.” The good news of great joy that they received was that their savior had arrived.

Let me stop there a moment and just stress again who this message was for. It was for *all people*. No one is excluded from the good news of great joy. Whoever we are, whatever we've done, whatever our situation, this message is for all of us, a message of love, a message of our salvation.

We see this not just at Jesus' birth, but throughout his life. As he ministered to the crowds, it was not the church people, the religious authorities, to whom he reached out. It was to those on the outside, those on the margins, to whom he said, "Yes, you, this message is for you." If anything, he chastised the religious authorities for putting up unnecessary obstacles that kept people away. In our own time, I shudder to imagine the words Jesus would have for our own church authorities. So many people have had their faith shaken because of the sins committed by our priests and bishops. It is scandalous in the fullest sense of that word – it leads others to fall away – and they will not escape being held to account by our Lord for the effects of their sin. My prayer for everyone is that we not allow the sins of our shepherds to drown out the good news of great joy that we remember every Christmas.

Because that news is the most important news in the history of the world. God cares for us, He knows exactly who we are and He loves us all the same. That is a message that can transform our lives for the better if we allow it to and we respond. When poor Joseph was told by the angel to not be afraid to take Mary into his home because the child she was carrying was the Son of God, he was invited to respond. When the shepherds were told to leave their flocks to go and see the infant lying in a manger, they were invited to respond. No one was forced to do anything – they were invited.

And the response that they were invited to give was just a small step of trust. “Ok, I will receive Mary and her child into my home. I don’t know what will happen next, but I’ll do that.” “Ok, we will go and see that the infant is in the manger like you say he is. We don’t know what will happen next, but we’ll do that.” “Okay, the Church is full of sinners, led by sinners, but it still offers good news of salvation, so I won’t leave. I don’t know what will happen next, but I’ll do that.” We hear the invitation, and we respond.

Notice that the response did not have to be, “I will now be perfect.” The response did not have to be, “I will believe and accept everything now without question.” No, the response was simply to take one step in trust, one step towards faith, one step towards God. Jesus does not say, “all or nothing, right now, choose.” He says, “Come and see. Come, follow me.”

Whatever your situation is, God has good news of great joy for you: He knows you to the depth of your being; He knows your heart, He knows your thoughts, He knows your struggles, He knows your pain, He knows your sins, and guess what: He loves you. That is the good news of great joy. Now He pauses, and awaits your response. I encourage you to take your next step towards Him, whether it is your first step or your thousandth, to say “yes” and open your heart to the love that God has for you. That is what the Christmas season is all about.