

Christmas Eve homily

Over the past seven years
we have seen some unbelievable natural disasters.
We have seen them up close,
with video footage, in living color.
They were messes beyond belief.

- the earthquake-induced tsunami in the Indian Ocean in 2004
- Hurricane Katrina slamming full force into New Orleans in 2005
- The earthquake in Haiti in January of 2010.
- The oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in April 2010.
- The earthquake off the coast of Japan last March, followed by a tsunami.

This last earthquake was a 9.0 on the Richter scale
and lasted for a full twenty minutes.
It was the most powerful earthquake the Japanese had ever experienced.
The tsunami had some waves reaching a height of 130 feet –
we saw footage of sea water pushing over every barrier,
leaving a sea of debris everywhere.
Three nuclear power plants in Fukushima
had their emergency generators swamped,
creating the conditions for nuclear meltdown.

In each of these there was a staggering loss,
either in terms of human habitation, human and animal life,
or damage to the environment.
And there was a mess to clean up and repair.
We are used to seeing people dressed in special gear,
to protect them from polluted water,
the hydrocarbon blend of an oil slick,
or radiation.

One way to think of the birth of Jesus into human history
is God helping us when we were in a huge mess.
And that mess is as follows:
Peace in the Roman empire was not a true peace
but enforced by overwhelming military power,
analogous to the Soviet empire.
The infinite demand of the Jewish covenant and the Ten Commandments
had been transformed into a religion of external observance.
This external focus was the Pharisaic interpretation of the law
that Jesus encounters and rejects in his ministry.
It is this interpretation of the law that Saint Paul rejects.
In Paul's view, all had failed, all were a day late and a dollar short.
No consistent ethic of forgiveness was available to people.
There was no pathway to eternal life.
There was no longer a vision for how human beings might become fully human.

It was a mess.

God responds to this mess, not by donning a haz-mat suit, but in human skin.
God is not being a mere dabbler, a meddler in our history.
God is making the decision to get down and dirty,
to become part of the mess of our situation as humans.

As the Gospels witness
and Saint Paul argues, "God is in Christ."
In Christ, God is not just near-by, or close,
not merely hanging around.
He is truly one of us.

How does Jesus as Son of God and son of Mary change the mess?
First, the reign of God that Jesus brings
is based, lived, and brought into being through compassion.
It is God's compassion for us
that brings Jesus to us in the first place.
Care for the least ones, the stranger, the vulnerable, those who need our love,
is at the heart of Gospel imagination.
The teaching of Jesus is powerful because
he embodies compassion in his teaching, forgiveness, and healing.
There is a direct relationship between the crib, the cross, and the Eucharistic table.
This newborn son, who becomes Risen Lord,
continually gives himself to us in Eucharist.

God's reign is about a new freedom in relationship to God.
In Jesus God decides to step over the human past,
the sorry history of hatred, violence, and destruction.
God is no longer going to be a counter, someone who keeps score,
to play a game of winning and losing with us.
We are all winners -- each one of us is a child of God.

On this holy night,
we come together to give witness to the life we have received
through the birth of Jesus the Christ.
Jesus, our Light, our Redeemer, has come.
Messes, it seems always are.
The incarnation, God's yes to us, gives us the courage, the faith, the resilience, the hope
to deal with the messes in our families, our communities, and between nations.
It is up to us, knowing what Jesus has done for us,
to put the teaching of Jesus into practice
and do something about them.

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