

Christmas Eve Homily

Father David I. Giffen

I speak to you in the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Imagine for a moment that you are standing street side, in Bethlehem, on the first Christmas night. Forget the images of movies, and Christmas pageants, which have portrayed a stable, as a comfy room, and a manger, filled with soft hay.

Instead, watch for the pregnant teenager, walking the streets before you, as she is rejected once, and then again, at every door she approaches. Watch while her husband urgently seeks shelter, for the two of them, out from the cold. Gaze upon the crèche with new eyes, at the birth of a child, in a stable, upon dirt, and coarse hay.

pause

Imagine for a moment that you are standing this night, with shepherds on the hillside of the fields. Forget the images of movies, and Christmas pageants, which have shown you angelic and gentle guides herding animals across the land.

Instead, put yourself in a 1st Century frame of mind, when shepherds were at the bottom of society's barrel. The world around you has cast them aside as lazy, and as dishonest, and as poor. No place for them stay, and no shelter from the cold – living off of whatever land they can find.

Imagine for a moment, a family, searching kindness, and imagine outcasts, who have forgotten what kindness even means.

Christmas in the church, and more specifically, Christmas in a downtown Cathedral, sees the faces *of many* searching for kindness. Whether it be in those separated from loved ones, longing for their presence, at this time of year, or whether it be in those struggling to survive, unable to provide for their families needs – you only have to spend one day here at the Cathedral, to be reminded that there *is need* in our world.

In my almost four years, here at Saint Paul's, I have become increasingly inspired each day, witnessing the work and ministry of those who offer themselves, to the Fellowship Center lunch program, and to the Daily Bread Food Bank.

Feeding almost 12,000 families this year at the daily bread, and close to 200 people a day at the Fellowship Center – the ministry and mission of Social Services at Saint Paul's, makes one thankful, for what this transformative group of people do each day, changing the lives of those struggling in our community. But as my friend's Bill and Eve, who run the Fellowship Center, would remind me, this *is not* a one-way ministry.

I am grateful, and I am thankful, for the work and care of the volunteers who give their time each day, but it is not *their work* which inspires me most. What has moved me beyond words, on more than one occasion, is not the transforming of the lives of those who come here *to receive* comfort and support, but the transforming of the lives of those who come here *to offer it*.

As one volunteer said to me earlier this year, 'I came here, to offer care to people in need, and found a people in need, caring for me.'

A couple of weeks ago, my wife Heather and I, went to the theatre to see a movie entitled 'The Blind Side.' Set in the southern American setting of Tennessee, the movie details the true story of Michael Oar, a homeless, African American teenager, adopted by a well-to-do, southern, white family.

In a monumental moment in the film, the adoptive mother is sitting with her high society friends, at a country-club luncheon, when somewhat condescendingly, someone comments, about what wonderful charity she has shown 'the boy,' and how lucky he is to have her changing his life.

With a smile on her face she responds quite simply, "No, he's changing mine."

Those who turned Mary and Joseph away that night didn't see the mother of Christ standing on their doorstep – just another mouth to feed. Those who told the young family, to move along as they did, didn't know who they sent away – just that *they* weren't taking responsibility for them.

In the action of closing each door on them, a door closed on each of themselves. In rejecting the opportunity to transform the lives of the family in front of them, they missed the opportunity to transform their own.

pause

Scripture tells us, that in that same region, there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Perhaps God called the shepherds *first*, because *they* were the only ones open enough to hearing the angel's voice. Not distracted by their worldly things, or preoccupied with wealth or status. Not focused on *tomorrow's* meal, but simply getting through *that* day. Little value to the world, these shepherds had been proclaimed, not so different from God's infant Son.

And so they were told, of the birth of a saviour – one who would bring *life* and *joy* to their world.

So the lowest of lowly, and the bottom of the world's barrel, would kneel first at the bedside of the Lord. And transformed by this experience, and blessed by what they shared; these shepherds of the field, these *cast-asides* of society, left the Christ child, as the very first evangelists.

In our advent preparation, for the coming of Christ, we have heard messages, encouraging us to seek out Jesus in the world. But often we look too quickly to the easy, nice, tidy, and predictable places around us: In scripture and in Christmas hymns, in ourselves, and other Christians, and within the walls of this church on Christmas night.

But Christ will rarely be found where we expect to find him – and his messengers may not always be who we thought, or wanted them to be. But, by opening our doors, by opening our hearts, and by opening our lives to the unexpected standing on our doorsteps before us – we invite Christ to enter, and to be born in our lives.

Many of us have heard the gospel message throughout our lives, calling us to see the hungry, and to feed them; to see the naked, and to clothe them; and to see the afflicted, and to comfort them.

But on this Christmas night, I invite you to hear, and to respond to the gospel message a little differently this time; that when we see the hungry and feed them, we too are fed; that when we see the naked and clothe them, we too discover warmth; and when we see the afflicted and comfort them, we too find relief.

Our God appears to us, in the pregnant teenager standing at our doors. Our God speaks to us, through the prophetic voices in our lives. Our God eats with us, when the hungry come for bread. Our God huddles with us, when the cold gather for warmth.

And as only our God can, our God still finds a way to us, even when we don't invite him in.

Thanks be to God.