

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one whose birth we celebrate in just 2 more days, Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord, amen.

When I was a kid I couldn't wait for my birthday. I was lucky enough to be born close enough to Christmas that everyone in my family still felt the generosity of the season and far enough after Christmas that they could take advantage of the after Christmas sales and I would normally benefit from both of those scenarios by making a huge haul of birthday gifts on January 4<sup>th</sup> each year. I don't know how getting old snuck up on me. I didn't even notice it. Now a days I no longer look forward to my birthday. Each January 4<sup>th</sup> is another reminder that I'm a year closer to that day we're all hoping to postpone as long as we can... When our grandchildren were newborn, I still looked forward to great celebrations marking the passage of a year of their precious lives, but even the anticipation of their special days now reminds me of how fast they are growing up and their birthday celebrations also bring mixed emotions for me at best and sometimes even become a burdensome of reminder of time passages.

In today's Gospel story we find two women, both pregnant by extraordinary, supernatural means, greeting each other and discovering the joy and blessing of the birthdays they are waiting for. For Elizabeth, she was well beyond childbearing years when God favored her with a son. He would grow up to become the last of the great prophets letting humanity know about the coming of the Savior, the Lamb

of God who takes away the sin of the world. Elizabeth greets her cousin Mary with words of both joy and blessing. For both women, the births they are looking forward too will also bring burdens. John the Baptist will wind up being beheaded by the evil King Herod and Mary's child will become the King of Kings, but not through conquering the world, but by the sacrifice of his own life for the world.

I wondered about this trip Mary made to visit her cousin as I thought about this message for today. I'm pretty sure the greeting Mary received from Elizabeth wasn't the greeting she got when she went to town shopping for food or from her friends, neighbors, or even her other relatives. I'm certain they would have given her the cold shoulder and a severe rebuke at best and might have even called for her to be put to death by stoning at worse. Most people wouldn't understand the circumstances of how Mary came to be with child, even after having the story explained to them. Come on Mary, they'd say, do you expect us to believe you're still a virgin and this child is the product of the Holy Spirit of God? Everywhere Mary went she was met with the same disdain and skepticism. Luckily for her, she did have someplace she could go where she was welcomed with joy and love. If anyone could understand Mary's supernatural story of a virgin birth, it was Elizabeth, herself pregnant in a likewise peculiar manner. So, the two of them sing their birthday songs and rejoice in God's favor, despite the burdens both women know is to come.

It's not always an easy thing to glimpse God's promise in these days before Christmas. Just as Mary had to look past the total upheaval of having this baby out of wedlock, so we can look past our own grief, pain, and suffering to see God still abundantly blessing our lives with his son today. It's so much easier to see the things the world is fond of seeing this time of year rather than how God is acting in our world to bless and sustain us. As all of us know, the promise of the secular Christmas is merrymaking, partying, and putting on a happy face. Like the song says "Don't Worry, Be Happy... It's a phony baloney plastic banana kind of happiness without true joy. The powers of this world would have us believe an infusion of material goods, bereft of spiritual values is what will give us joy, security, and happiness. The world's values result in frantic, scurrying people grasping for things we don't have and for the most part don't need, all the while failing to celebrate gifts of the Spirit we've already been given in abundance. Faced with the onslaught of Christmas materialism, it's easy for good, Christian people to get discouraged about the holiday. We all do it: we complain... We complain about Christmas trees going up in department stores before Halloween. We complain of how "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" and "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus" so often seem to drown out "O Come, All Ye Faithful" and "Silent Night." We complain about giant inflatable Santas and snowmen taking the place of Manger scenes on the front lawns

of suburban homes, schools, and court houses on town squares. We complain the holiday seems to have hijacked the holy day.

Well, these things are all true, but if we let our distaste for yuletide materialism eclipse the spiritual meaning of Christmas, then the materialists have won. The birthday we celebrate on December 25<sup>th</sup> will have become a burden. There's at least two ways to get sidetracked by secularism at Christmas: We can simply surrender, giving in completely to shallow "Seasons Greetings" materialism, or we can invest so much energy fighting it we lose track of what Christmas is all about. For me, it's far better to go through these few remaining days of Advent smiling with amusement at the tinsel excess all around us — all the while remaining attentive to the true substance and meaning of the earth changing event we're about to celebrate.

So, how do we keep Christ in Christmas? How do we learn and teach our kids and grandchildren how to recognize Jesus in a commercialized world of lights and glitter? Here's something I've been doing with my Confirmation classes for about 10 years now and it's basically the same thing we do with the high schoolers who come to the Core Club at Franklin Monroe. I ask what's your high point of your week and what's your low point of your week. Then as a follow-up question I ask where did you see God or Jesus working through your highs and lows? At Core Club we ask the same basic questions in a slightly different way. We ask the kids to share their joys, junk, and Jesus moments. It's the same thing only in a cooler way...

The point is that we all have highs and lows, but we don't always see how God's working in and through those times. As I thought about this Gospel and our topic of discerning Jesus in a materialistic world, it occurred to me that we should ask each other and ask ourselves these questions every day. For you parents, as you're saying night time prayers with your children, ask them to share their highs and lows and where they saw Jesus that day. Maybe one saw Jesus as a teacher helped her, or in a homeless person they saw on the street. Maybe it was in the flowers on the altar on Sunday or the trees getting new buds in the spring. Maybe it's in retelling the familiar Christmas story, but using even more familiar nursery rhymes. The point is to begin to look for and find Jesus who is active in so many ways in and through the ordinary things of our lives. Ordinary things, like the waters of Baptism and the bread and wine of communion. Ordinary like the hymns we sing and even ordinary like the song we sing for almost every birthday, Happy Birthday to You.

May we learn to see Jesus in the highs, the lows, and every moment in between of our lives. May his birthday never become shrouded in crass commercialism or overcome by skepticism. May the Birthday of Jesus Christ never become a burden, but remind us of how much God loves us in that God was willing to become flesh and bone to suffer and die for us that we might live with and for Him. May God be glorified this Christmas and every day of the year, amen.