

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the incarnate Word of God made Flesh, Jesus Christ our Savior, amen.

No amount of preparation and planning can stop mother nature when she decides the time is right for a “Cyclone Bomb!” I thought I had this Christmas in the bag, but as the saying goes when we plan, God laughs... Cyclone Bombs aside, this was still one of my best, most memorable Christmas Seasons ever! Long before the dire predictions of the Arctic Circle coming to town, we had laid up our plans to have our Merry Christmas on December 22nd. That was the only time when we could all get together. PJ’s new mom and her Aunt came to visit from Wednesday through Friday and our Daughter, Niki had to work on Christmas Day, so, it just seemed appropriate for our family to gather and celebrate Christmas a few days early this year. PJs mom has Macular Degeneration and is almost totally blind. It’s hard to find a really good gift for someone who can’t see. This year PJ found a book where you can read it out loud and the book records your voice. That’s just what she did. The title of the book was How many ways I love you and each page was another thing PJ loves about her mom. Mama Jane listened to her daughter’s voice and began to cry. When she started I couldn’t hold back. My heart was so full at that moment, it leaked out through my tears...

As I was thinking about the early arrival of Baby Jesus at our house, it occurred to me what a messy business giving birth really is. Some of you have had

babies, so, you know much better than I do what it's like at that particular moment. I don't mean to make light of the significance of this the birth of Jesus, but as I pondered that great event in human history I remembered just how useless I was during the birth of our three children. I mean I fell asleep for a while during PJ's labor with Melanie, and I was even less helpful during the other two births. So, I'm far from an expert on the subject of childbirth. Still, I know this moment is what Mary and Joseph have been longing for and fearing at the same time. It's a frightening, exhilarating, hopeful, confounding time. When it came time for each of our three children's births, I felt totally unprepared and incapable of knowing what to do. I didn't think we were ready to be parents... This complexity had to be even more pronounced for a teenage mom in a patriarchal society without her family around. Nothing against Joseph here, but it's hard to imagine him being much help when things got real. I mean, I know I wasn't much help and that was after a half-dozen classes on Lamas birthing techniques where they taught me how to tell PJ to remember to breath...

So, in this moment of holy incarnation, where God is quite literally coming into being as a human being, we hear a teenage mother cry out in pain. She's afraid, but ever so alive and filled with joy. Her cries are really prayers asking for God's help. I almost wrote "God's presence" but, well, that's exactly the point,

isn't it... God *is* present. This teenager is giving birth to Immanuel and God will be forevermore with us.

At some point during one of our three birthing events, I remember PJ yelling at me that I would never touch her again... As I remembered her saying that to me, it made me laugh. I wonder if there were some humorous moments during Jesus' birth as well. Maybe Mary's face, contorted in pain, as she shouts at Joseph, "You are never touching me again!" To which he meekly responds, "But honey—I never *did* touch you!"... Probably not what happened, but it makes me smile and it makes the whole thing so ... human.

Christmas is a human story. It's about real human beings like Mary, and Joseph, the shepherds, and the Magi from the east. It's also about the evil that prevails in the world. Herod the Dr Evil of his day wanting to kill this baby before he even takes his first steps... I wonder if the tradition of gathering together as family started with this decree from Quirinius. Everyone had to go back to the town where their family came from. Talk about a family reunion! Today, Christmas is still somewhat about gathering together as family to celebrate these wonderful and glorious actions of our loving God. This celebration has been going on almost since the beginning. The first recorded Christmas celebration happened in Rome in the year 325 AD. It's celebrated in many ways throughout the centuries and around the world ever since. This year as every year I try to

remember those who may not be able to be with their families. There are some who are mourning the loss of loved ones and for them, there's an empty seat at the table and an empty hole in their hearts. As much as I love being with my family and spending holidays with them, they are not the reason for the season... If I put my faith and hope in family time, I will be disappointed when a key member has to work on the big day or I remember all those who I've celebrated with in the past who are no longer present with us. As much as we love our families, they will ultimately leave us feeling flat and alone at some point.

Not so with our God! Jesus is our "God with us" in every way. Jesus was born messy, lived among messy people, and died a horribly messy death on a cross. He did all that for you. He did all that so you might know the depth and breadth of God's love for you. This Holy Infant, born of a virgin is the same person who will grow up to be the man who died for your sins on the cross. This Holy infant, so tender and mild, will grow up to overturn the money changer's tables in the Temple because they forgot God's House is a house of prayer. This Holy Infant will be bruised and crushed for our sin. Yet, the Angels came to the shepherds claiming this Holy Infant would bring peace on earth to all whom God favors. This day we celebrate, not the joy of family gatherings, but the joy of gathering as God's Family. God has decided the earth and everyone on this planet

shall be forever blessed by this Holy Infant. That's some really Good News worth celebrating and sharing on this Christmas Day and all through the year!

May this Christmas, with all the wind, snow, and bitter cold, help us to remember the God who was born on this day, some 2000 years ago in a cattle barn to a teenage mother and a clueless father. May this Christmas remind us God did it all for you to give you victory over sin, death and the devil. May this Christmas remind us just how much God loves you and how far God will go to redeem and to save you. Merry Christmas! Amen!