**Christmas 2024**

As the old song goes, *It's the most wonderful time of the year!* Well, yes and no. It depends what you mean by "wonderful." Think about it. There's an expectation, spoken or unspoken, that everyone should be happy at Christmas. With lots of presents under the tree, gleeful children on Santa's lap, tables of fine food and drink, and gatherings of loving friends and family, who wouldn't be happy, right? But we've commercialized and sentimentalized Christmas, creating the illusion that if you're not happy at Christmas there may be something wrong with you.

Truth be told, many people are not happy at Christmas. Indeed, for many, Christmas is a sad and difficult time. Think of the parents of a child with cancer. Or the lonely spouse of a Navy ensign stationed far away in the Philippines. Or the middle-age manager who was downsized from his corporation, can't find a comparable job and whose unemployment benefits are about to run out. Or the widow who’s spending her first Christmas without her spouse of 50 years. The loss of parents. Or the homeless who seem to be everywhere these days. There are millions and millions of people at home and abroad living in poverty, with war, with disease, with unclean water, lack of healthy food, and general hopelessness.

It's important to remember that the first Christmas, though full of true wonder, was not a very happy time. Mary, nine months pregnant, made her way on a donkey, Joseph walking, to Bethlehem—a 70-mile trip—to register in a Roman Empire imposed census. When they arrived, cold and tired, there was no place to stay except in a barn adjacent to an overcrowded inn. Mary went into labor that night and Jesus was born in a cold stable. Does that sounds like a happy time? I've been through a lot as a parent and grandparent, but that scenario trumps any stressful situation I've been through!

So here's the truth, my friends: The true meaning of Christmas is to be found in life as it is, with all the joys and the sorrows of real existence in our human condition. For the Holy Family, not only was Jesus born in a drafty barn, but Mary and Joseph had to whisk him away to Egypt by night—another 40 miles—to avoid Herod's wrath. Most of us aren't facing that sort of challenge, but family life in 2024 was both joyful and sorrowful for us all, if we're honest. It's OK. God was with us in the real, through the good, the bad and the ugly. God-with-us: Emmanuel. That's Christmas. God-with-us no matter what.

The Greeks have a word unlike any we have in English. It's "charmolupe" and it literally means 'joyful-sorrow.' It's one word that describes two emotions that don't seem to go together. Yet, it's a word that describes the truth of that first Christmas, and the truth of our lives as individuals and families at Christmas and all the year round. Joyful-sorrow...it transcends happiness and makes sense of the mixed emotions we experience in life-as-it-is.

In the words of J. Sanidopoulos, "All things in life are mixed with sorrow and joy. Life is not a theatre with scene changes, but an experience that is both joyful and sorrowful, where sorrow turns to joy and the point where joy culminates, sorrow emerges again, due to the mortality of our passionate nature." Indeed. Tonight I’m living in real time into this joyful-sorrow paradox, as this morning at 8:45 am we had to put down our beloved Calico cat, Paisley. All cats (and dogs) go to heaven.

It doesn’t at first sound like good news, but Jesus was born to die. At age 30 that baby Jesus born in Bethlehem became the Crucified and Risen Christ of our faith. Eternity promises freedom and release from the contradictions of joyful-sorrow, but in this life we must live in the tension. Trying to escape it is futile and illusory.

Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year, because it surprises us by joy, embraces us in hope, and kisses us on the lips with peace and the promise of eternity, in the midst of whatever life is bringing us at the moment. And finally, as we gather around the table of Eucharist in a few moments to be fed with the Bread of Heaven, I’m calling you to be bread to nourish those you meet during this 12 day Christmas season. To be light and love in a dark and hate-filled world. To illustrate in your flesh and blood for others what it means to live in the paradox of joyful-sorrow. Our faith is not pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by, but the real deal in the here and now. Merry Christmas. **May it be so!**