

Today we gather to recall that world-changing night in the hills of Judah. We come together for Christmas: the only birthday celebrated all over the world. I love birthdays. One of the great traditions in my family is to retell the story of the day we were born. I really enjoy this retelling. Every year I get to hear how my mom and dad barely got to the hospital in time and how they were thrilled when the doctor told them I was a redhead. It never gets old! My family likes to say I was born early and have been in a hurry ever since.

Here in Church, we all have that same joy of gathering together as a family to hear the story of THE birthday. And what a beautiful story it is! On the surface, it seems like a story that shouldn't have made it beyond Bethlehem. What could be world-changing about a baby boy born in a stable to a poor, obscure carpenter and his wife? But we all know the answer. That wasn't just any family and it wasn't an ordinary child. It was the Holy Family. It was Jesus. THE Jesus. Emmanuel, God-with-us, fully God and fully human, the One who would suffer and die to save each and every one of us here, as well as every other person who ever lived and ever will. THAT is a Birthday. THAT is a story!

Throughout history, this story has been told and retold, spread far and wide and celebrated by every race, culture and people. I can't think of anything else that compares. Nothing else gathers people all over the world like the birth of Jesus. And there is good reason for this. Jesus' birthday grabs us all because it includes us all. There in Bethlehem during the reign of King Herod almost two-thousand years ago, in the middle of the night, the start of a worldwide family was laid gently in a bed of straw in a feeding trough.

The birth of Christ in those humble conditions is part of every one of our stories. Each of us, through our baptism, shares in the life of Jesus and is part of that great family God has drawn to himself from every nation. Jesus wasn't just born today, He was born for *us*. For each of us here. He lived His life for us. He died and rose for us.

Truly, each of us has a place around the manger because we're all part of the Church that grew from that humble Holy Family into the biggest, craziest, and most loving family the world has ever known. Sometimes our Church family needs tough love, but that is the reality of family life. Our family is a forgiving family; a family that is there for each other in times of crisis and in times of joy. Each Sunday, we gather as a family around this altar where we encounter the same Jesus who was born today and is still with us in the Eucharist, humble as ever, hidden under the appearance of bread and wine. Yes, this family is here for us in good times and in bad. It is no accident that being with family is such a central part of Christmas for many people. This is not just a formality, but a reflection of that great family of the Church that celebrates as one across the world today.

For those of you who have experienced loss, know that this family is here for you during this time when it is difficult to feel the joy of the season. Jesus was born, died and rose to give hope to all who are saddened by the passing of loved ones. This Christmas, remember that our Christian hope extends to all who have gone before us. We move forward together, entrusting them to God and taking solace in the love, strength and community of our church family.

If you are feeling alone today, know for sure this Christmas that you are *not* lost on our God, who would have come even if it was only you in the whole world that needed saving. God's family is here especially for you. You are never alone in the Church.

So this Christmas, as we gather as a Church family before the manger, let us make room in our hearts for the One who began this so many years ago and who still holds our Church together today. Regardless of where we are in our lives, Jesus wants to come closer to us and to draw us more deeply into His family. Thank you Lord for this day, and thank you for this great family. Amen!