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Reflection for Midnight Mass 2020 Luke 2:1-20

Someone may say that this Christmas that happened more than 2,000 years ago, for Joseph, Mary and Jesus has failed.

Mary and Joseph did not take a picture of the newborn baby, and did not post it on Facebook and Instagram. They didn't collect dozens of likes from family and friends.

There was no large family at the table (if there was one at all). There was no Midwife at the Manger. They were celebrating this night with the closest family and later with strangers - shepherds. No Christmas tree, no roast turkey and no Christmas pudding. Santa Claus hasn't been born yet. So, there were no presents there.

Someone may say that he wouldn't be surprised if they were affected by the so-called Christmas depression, which affects lonely people. But can we say that they failed at Christmas?

I am always amazed at the joy of Mary and Joseph, lovingly bent over the manger; the joy of angels and shepherds. Christmas is a mystery that is impossible to fully understand or even imagine.

Mythologies speak of the birth of gods. However, these gods showed their uniqueness right away. Even Heracles - as Ovid said in his *Metamorphoses* - strangled the serpents as they enter his cradle.

Jesus is different. King of kings. Lord of lords. Almighty God - is born as an absolutely and completely helpless and needy child. But this helpless child has brought us an incredible gift. The gift of peace.

Saint Luke spoke Greek, and therefore, he used the Greek word "Eirene" to describe peace. However, because the angels spoke to the shepherds who came from Palestine, they spoke Hebrew-Aramaic. So, the word used by the angels was not Greek, but Hebrew: "Shalom."

This is important because Greek and Hebrew have slightly different concepts of peace. The Greek term "peace" is equivalent to such concept as "absence of war". This "peace" has a social, political, moral and psychological sense. The scope of this Greek term is limited to the temporal world.

The Hebrew word "shalom" carries much more than the Greek meaning. In the Old Testament - and still among the Jews today - the term "shalom" is used as a greeting.

This is how God addresses Gideon, who froze in terror when he saw the glory of God - (Judges 6:23), "Peace! Shalom! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die" – said God. Mary of Nazareth also heard this word in greeting from the angel Gabriel: "Hail, Mary (Shalom, Myriam)." Even the Risen Lord uses this word when addressing the disciples gathered behind locked doors, afraid, anxious and isolated: "Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!'" (Shalom Aleichem) (John 20:26; Luke 24:36).

Over and over again in the Scriptures we see that in this way, using the word shalom, a fearful people are always encouraged: do not be afraid - shalom to you (Genesis 43:23).

So, at the birth of Jesus, angels use this word not only as a greeting, but as a signal that they are bringing a message that relates to the Old Testament - do not be afraid!

The phrases "do not fear" or "do not be afraid" are written 365 times in the Bible. God knows your heart; God knows your fear of this invisible enemy which we call 'coronavirus.' In Psalm 31:11 we can find the words: "Those who see us on the street flee from us." That's so true today about our life.

God know that we have become afraid of each other, afraid to resume any routine of daily activities, afraid to go to work, school, shop and even church. God knows about our financial losses, social isolation, being quarantined, family conflicts, cancelled events, not being able to work, and even a death of loved ones.

He knows that this fear can destroy closeness between us that is so vital to our well-being.

That's why today God promises more than just personal or social well-being. God promises help and a return to the situation of prosperity and happiness ("I will heal", "I will console", "I will be with you to the end of the world", "I will carry with you what is difficult for you to bear"). Peace that Jesus gives is not the absence of trouble, but is the confidence that He is always with us.

The peace that the angels of the Nativity announce to humankind is “shalom” - that peace prophesied in the Old Testament, now, is realized in Jesus.

Jesus not only "came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near" (Ephesian 2:17), but He is also the maker of peace. Christ himself is "our peace" (Ephesian 2:14).

Peace, perfect peace, with loved ones far away?

In Jesus' keeping we are safe, and they.

(wrote Edward Henry Bickersteth, Bishop of Exeter, in 1875 in his famous hymn).

For the third time this year, lots of things have been cancelled by the coronavirus, but we know that: love cannot be cancelled; care for each other cannot be cancelled; kind words cannot be cancelled; hope cannot be cancelled; and finally Christmas cannot be cancelled.

The Lord is my light / and my salvation—
whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold / of my life—
of whom shall I be afraid? (Psalm 27:1)

I have no intention to explain Christmas tonight. To be honest, I don't know how to explain it. What I want you is / to experience Christmas tonight. I want you to have the courage not only to accept the Son of God, this helpless and needy child; but also, to accept the gift that He brought to each of us this night – the gift of peace, shalom.

This child holds before us hope for a better tomorrow. But this child also wants and needs to be held by us. This child is the face of humanity and the face of God. This child is the one who heals and forgives. This child is our song of praise; our fortress and our shield. This child is peace. This child is shalom. This child is our Christmas.

At this point I could end my reflection, but I remember what Louisa May Alcott wrote in her novel 'Little Women': "Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents, grumbled Jo, lying on the rug." So, I wish you this Christmas God's peace – shalom but also, I hope you will find for yourself time and space today later on, when you can finally lie on the rug and start unwrapping your presents.

May God bless you all.