

Year C Midnight Mass 2021 HTK

Some 70 years ago or so I decided to go to Midnight Mass on my own. I was about 9 or 10 years old. I checked with my parents, and they said OK. It wasn't a long walk to the Parish church, but it was in the dark, and in those days streetlights didn't stay on all night.

Fortunately, part of my journey was guided by the light on the top of the church steeple. Eventually I arrived to be greeted by a rather brusque Parish priest who told me that the boys never sang at Midnight mass since it was far too late for them and what was I doing there. Nevertheless, since I was there he decided to turn me into a boat boy.

One of the advantages of going to Midnight Mass then was that I got home at about 1.30 am in the morning and since my presents were already under the Christmas tree. I decided to open them then and there, much to the horror of my parents who discovered this in the morning.

There are two things that I especially love about this midnight mass. The first is that it really is a midnight mass. We will pass over from Christmas Eve into Christmas Day as we celebrate the Eucharist. It is so wonderfully counter-cultural to be in church at midnight.

I love this. What it says is that God is always doing the unexpected and urging us to do the unexpected-- like come to worship and stay past midnight. It also reminds those of us who are usually in bed by 10 pm that there are still some things worthy of staying up late. I do realize-- that for some of you, midnight is hardly late but hopefully you too will admit that midnight on Christmas holds a magic for all ages, for both night owls and early birds.

The other thing I love about this Midnight Mass is after its over we go out into the dark just as I did those decades ago, although this time the streetlights are still on. For we live in both the dark and the light.

We often sing the well-known and much-loved Christmas carol "Silent Night." Silent night, holy night.... Yet the truth is it is highly unlikely that the night of Jesus' birth was silent. Holy, yes. Silent, no.

Babies coming into the world generally don't tend to be quiet affairs. Think about the sounds. Perhaps Mary crying out during the birth. Joseph reaching for the child, whispering words of comfort, to both baby and Mary.

In the Creed we affirm that Jesus is fully divine and fully human. I imagine that fully human baby came into the world not with uplifted hands as though blessing, but wailing at the top of his little very human lungs. Perhaps there were others there as well. Joseph may have sent for help-- there may have been women from that Bethlehem neighbourhood that came to assist with the birth.

Tradition tells us there were animals-- lambs bleating, donkeys braying, a cow or two mooing--perhaps even a crowing rooster and a clucking hen or two. There may have been noises from the town streets- a heated argument spilling out from one of the overly full inns, people chopping wood for fires, peddlers calling out in the wee morning hours.

What a world of noise it must have been for the newly born Jesus. Merry Chaos, little one! Happy not-so-silent night!

Our culture today tends to make the Christmas story a Hallmark special of sentimentality. There's nothing wrong with sentimental, but it's highly unlikely that this first century birth was a Charlie Brown sort of Christmas.

There were noises and smells--some not too pleasant no doubt. Mary, like most mothers who have just given birth, was probably exhausted. They already know that God will use this child in ways they cannot really imagine. That in itself is both wonderful and terrifying.

Jesus is entering the world in a time of strife and terror. There was no doubt great tension throughout the city-- everyone having to report for the compulsory census. Be counted, be registered and then be taxed. Not showing up was not an option.

Herod was not known as a good and generous ruler. He was known as an executioner, a slaughterer.

The world was in desperate need of good news. The baby is born and immediately the angels go out to tell the world. They go out into the fields to tell the shepherds. The good news did not go first to the wealthy and the privileged. The news came first to the poor, these rural laborers--shepherds.

At first the shepherds are afraid. Surely there must have been at least

a few moments of unbelief! Surely The Messiah? Just up the road? Really?!!

But regardless of what the shepherds were thinking or muttering under their breath, Luke's gospel says they went. They went to see for themselves. How important it is to go and see for ourselves. How easy it is to discount even good news, to scoff it away. But the shepherds went.

The shepherds heard, they went, they saw, they were stunned--they worshipped--and they went out and told others. Today we would call that model evangelism!

What does this story mean for us today? How do we find light in the darkness in a world today which also seems in desperate need for good news?

Repeatedly God calls us to pay attention to "babies in mangers." I don't mean that literally. I mean we are called to pay attention when we see God at work in the world in unexpected, in surprising ways. We are called to not expect God to fit neatly into our or the world's little box of expectations. We are called to pay attention when love comes down in unexpected places at unexpected moments.

We EXPECT (though it doesn't always happen) that we will meet God in church. Isn't church where God lives? Yes and no. Yes, I hope God lives here. But God is not confined to church or to one place or to one people.

If we pay attention, we might hear God speak to us.
If we listen, we may hear the voice of angels in a prison
or at a hospice bedside or in a school classroom or in a parking lot.

If we push aside our dark tendencies to blame others or to lament
the hard knocks that life has dealt us (and life can wield some
knockout punches), we might rediscover hope--and even joy.
Love comes down.

When we feel we are too small, too insignificant to make a difference
we might remember that we have been given immense power.

Coming out of the darkness and noise and conflict and seeing a
newly born baby, is not the END of the story.

Kneeling or standing in silence before one small lighted candle
is not the END of our service.

Christmas is the BEGINNING of our story. Every year we hear the
story once again and every year we are given another chance to
begin again. To embrace the love that comes down.