

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent - Homily

#### *Christmas Can Be Different.*

Do you ever wonder if we are missing the meaning and the essence of Christmas?

Where is the promised peace and joy of the season?

For many of us, the last few days before Christmas are rarely filled with peace and joy. This is especially true for parents. Their days are packed with final (and often pressured) preparations of presents, programs and celebrations.

The words “All is calm” is anything but our experience, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus. This can leave us wondering if we are nothing more than Christmas “Martha’s,” who are “distracted with much serving... anxious and troubled about many things” and missing the “Mary” moment in all the merry. (Luke 10:40–42).

Where does all the promised Christmas joy go?

How do things get so complicated? So rushed? So squeezed and cluttered?

Like you I am not sure how or when we started to miss the meaning of Christmas. But I am sure that the tension and conflict we experience does not have to be. We can choose to step aside, step into a quieter moment, and make Christmas different... if we want to.

And I would like to give you some insight on a family that did just that...

I would like to share with you a true story that first appeared in Woman’s Day Magazine in 1982. This story has also become a part of a blog and reflections assembled by Catholic Evangelist Gus Lloyd. The family continues to keep this tradition alive to this day. This family tradition has also inspired a Project and web site by the same name.

This is the story of the “White Envelope”

*It’s just a small, white envelope stuck among the branches of our Christmas tree. No name, no identification, no inscription. It has peeked through the branches of our tree at this time of the year for the past 10 years or so.*

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*It all began because my husband Mike hated Christmas. Oh, not the true meaning of Christmas, but the commercial aspects of it. You know, the overspending, the frantic running around at the last minute to get a tie for Uncle Harry, and the dusting powder for Grandma, the gifts given in desperation because you couldn't think of anything else.*

*Knowing he felt this way, I decided one year to bypass the usual shirts, sweaters, ties and so forth. I reached for something special just for Mike. The inspiration came in an unusual way. Our son Kevin, who was 12 that year, was wrestling at the junior level at the school he attended. Shortly before Christmas, there was a non-league match against a team sponsored by an inner city church.*

*The kids from this Church team were very poor. These youngsters, dressed in sneakers so ragged that shoestrings seemed to be the only thing holding them together, and their ragged appearance presented a sharp contrast to our boys in their spiffy blue and gold uniforms and sparkling new wrestling shoes. As the match began, I was alarmed to see that the other team was wrestling without head-gear, this a kind of light helmet designed to protect a wrestler's ears. It was a luxury the ragtag team obviously couldn't afford.*

*Well, we ended up walloping them. We took every weight class. And as each of their boys got up from the mat, he swaggered around in his tatters with false bravado, a kind of street pride that couldn't acknowledge defeat.*

*Mike, seated beside me, shook his head sadly, "I wish just one of them could have won," he said. "They have a lot of potential, but losing like this could take the heart right out of them."*

*Mike loved kids – all kids. He understood kids in competitive situations, having coached little league football, baseball and lacrosse. That's when the idea for his present came.*

*That afternoon, I went to a local sporting goods store and bought an assortment of wrestling headgear and shoes and sent them anonymously to the inner city church. On Christmas Eve, I placed*

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*the envelope on the tree, the note inside telling Mike what I had done and that this was his gift from me. His smile was the brightest thing about Christmas that year and in succeeding years.*

*For each Christmas, I followed the tradition – one year sending a group of mentally challenged youngsters to a hockey game, another year I sent a check to a pair of elderly brothers whose home had burned to the ground the week before Christmas – and on and on...*

*The envelope became the highlight of our Christmas. It was always the last thing opened on Christmas morning and our children, ignoring their new toys, would stand with wide-eyed anticipation as their dad lifted the envelope from the tree to reveal its contents. As the children grew, the toys gave way to more practical presents, but the envelope never lost its allure.*

*But the story doesn't end there. You see, we lost Mike several years ago to cancer. When Christmas rolled around, I was still so wrapped in grief that I barely got the tree up. Yet Christmas Eve found me placing an envelope on the tree, and in the morning, it was joined by three more. Each of our children, unbeknownst to the others, had placed an envelope on the tree for their dad.*

*The tradition has grown and someday will expand even further, with our grandchildren standing around the tree with wide-eyed anticipation, watching as their fathers take down their envelopes. Mike's spirit, like the spirit of Christmas, will always be with us.*

Nancy knew her husband and through him she came to know the meaning and essence of Christmas... And because she knew this, she also knew she how to make Christmas different.

She knew that the real meaning of Christmas called for her to reach outside of herself... she knew that making a difference for someone else is the only way to experience joy and peace.

If we want too... We can make Christmas different too. We can step aside, into a quieter moment, and experience the meaning and essence of Christmas.

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We just need to stop, reflect and ask... Where is Jesus amidst the Christmas busy? Where is Jesus in the hustle and bustle?

Where is the white envelope?

All we need do is realize that the Lord has placed the most wonderful gift in our lap - a gift of truth in the person of his Son. It is then that we can grasp the value and the import of the white envelope, and understand the beauty of Christmas busy.

It's not all about the wrapping paper, about the bows, about the act of wrapping, but it is about the heart - a receptive heart, a heart that looks to fill the deepest need of another. It is about what we are willing to give to meet someone else's deepest need.

And, as we open God's gift to us... the heart of the matter comes to light; we can see the love of Christ... authentic and deep. A Heartfelt love that we are called to share we others.

What gift will be in the white envelope you give this Christmas?