“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light…”
Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo
December 25, 2018
Christmas – Midnight Mass
St Mary’s Cathedral, Fargo

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light… For a child is born to us, a son is given us; upon his shoulder dominion rests.” Dear friends, on this holy and peaceful night, our hearts are lifted up by the song of angels, and I wish each of you a Merry Christmas. To all who are here, and to your loved ones at home, I ask God’s blessing, and pray that his peace will be with you always.

You might say that this celebration transports us to another place and another time, to Bethlehem in another age. In that ancient world, people lived in uneasiness and fear. Those in power were often cruel, and the lives of ordinary people were expendable. The gods were thought to be capricious and vengeful, distant and usually unconcerned about us. Even among the people of Israel, there was a fear of the powers of darkness, and God was ineffable, with them but always somehow distant.

But into that hard, coarse world, during a still night in a village far from the palaces of kings, there was a cry, the cry of a newborn child. That child was born to a humble couple who were travelers, and who had no place to stay for the night. The child seemed so ordinary, and was born in a stable. He had all the needs and helplessness of any newborn, and he threatened no one. He couldn’t even lift his own head, so fragile was he.

But this child was the One who would break the cycle of fear and uneasiness that gripped the world. His coming had been foretold by prophets and was announced by an angel. He was acclaimed by a heavenly choir, who couldn’t help but rejoice at this great event, an event they had looked forward to since the beginning of time. This child would show the world forever that there was no further reason to fear. The powers of this world and the distant, mythical gods would pass away, and would no longer hold sway over us. Because God had come into the world, not just as an observer, not just as a visitor. He had come to be with us, to dwell among us, even to be one of us.

The child born in Bethlehem was Jesus, a name that means “God saves.” He came in our human nature, in our very flesh and blood, to show us once and for all that God does save, that God is with us, that God loves us, and we have no reason to fear. In the person of Jesus, that little child born among animals in a cave, as Paul tells us, the salvation of God was made visible, the love of God was revealed and would remain with us for all ages.

When one looks at this scene, can there be any doubt of God’s care for his children? He could have cut to the chase and just come in thunder and fire. He could have come in the mysterious form of an angel, a messenger who speaks God’s message and vanishes. He could have come as a warrior, vanquishing earthly enemies in the violence of battle. He could have come as a king or emperor with overwhelming power who demands groveling from his subjects. But instead he came as a child, whose only power was a love that conquers every other power in the universe. God could not have come closer to man, could not have done more and could not have shown us his love in a more fascinating way than he did in Bethlehem. He comes so quietly and humbly so the humble of this world, like the shepherds, will not be afraid to approach him. He comes in such frailty so the mighty of this world will discover what real power is. He comes to all of us in the stillness of this night to silence the clamor of the world and to bring peace.

I probably say this every year, but I do hope each of us will have time this Christmas to just look quietly at the figure of Jesus in the crib. What more contemplative prayer could there be than to adore with Mary and Joseph the newborn babe who is the Son of God? Look at him and realize that the powers of this world have been put in their place. They might seem to still pack a punch, but they have nothing on the One who came to us in Bethlehem, who is the Incarnate Son of God, and whose love is eternal.
Yes, it’s true, we still face sadness and difficulties in this world, and even in the Church. The world around us can still be hard and cold. But, with the birth of Jesus, we know that the love of God has already won. He becomes one with us, one of us, so that he can die for our sins and overcome that death with his resurrection. He is born into our world so that we might live forever with him in heaven. And far from being a distant god who cares little for humanity, Jesus accompanies us in the flesh and shows his eternal love for every one of his Father’s children.

A number of years ago, at a Midnight Mass just like this one, Pope St. John Paul II said this: “On this Holy Night the ancient promise is fulfilled: the time of waiting has ended and the Virgin gives birth to the Messiah. Jesus is born for a humanity searching for freedom and peace; he is born for everyone burdened by sin in need of salvation, and yearning for hope.” A child is born for us, a child who assures us of God’s unfailing love, that God is always with us; a child who would break the power of sin and death and give us hope even in the midst of trials; a child who invites us to be transformed, to live not with a sense of futility, but with joy and hope in a life that will have no end. May Jesus, the child of Bethlehem, lighten our hearts and unite us with his Father, and may our celebration of Christmas bring us his peace.