

**CHRISTMAS EVE - 2015**

**OUR FIRST READING FROM ISAIAH: "THE PEOPLE WHO WALKED IN DARKNESS HAVE SEEN A GREAT LIGHT....."**

**OUR GOSPEL FROM LUKE: "NOW THERE WERE SHEPHERDS IN THAT REGION....KEEPING THE NIGHT WATCH OVER THEIR FLOCK....."**

**ALLOW ME TO BEGIN WITH THIS STORY - PROVIDED BY DEACON GREG**

**IN 1994, TWO CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES ANSWERED AN INVITATION FROM THE RUSSIAN DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION TO TEACH MORALS AND ETHICS IN A LARGE ORPHANAGE.**

**ABOUT 100 BOYS AND GIRLS WHO HAD BEEN ABANDONED, ABUSED, AND LEFT IN THE CARE OF A GOVERNMENT-RUN PROGRAM WERE IN THE ORPHANAGE....**

**IT WAS NEARING CHRISTMAS AND THE MISSIONARIES DECIDED TO TELL THEM THE STORY OF CHRISTMAS....**

**IT WOULD BE THE FIRST TIME THESE CHILDREN WOULD HEAR THE STORY OF THE BIRTH OF CHRIST**

**THEY TOLD THE CHILDREN ABOUT MARY AND JOSEPH ARRIVING IN BETHLEHEM...**

**FINDING NO ROOM IN THE INN, THE COUPLE WENT TO A STABLE, WHERE THE BABY JESUS WAS BORN AND PLACED IN A MANGER...**

**THROUGHOUT THE STORY, THE CHILDREN AND THE ORPHANAGE STAFF SAT IN AMAZEMENT AS THEY LISTENED..**

**WHEN THE STORY WAS FINISHED, THE MISSIONARIES GAVE THE**

**CHILDREN THREE SMALL PIECES OF CARDBOARD TO MAKE A CRUDE MANGER.....**

*EACH CHILD WAS GIVEN A SMALL PAPER SQUARE, CUT FROM YELLOW NAPKINS THAT THE MISSIONARIES HAD BROUGHT WITH THEM, SINCE NO COLORED PAPER WAS AVAILABLE....*

*FOLLOWING INSTRUCTIONS, THE CHILDREN TORE THE KPAPER AND CAREFULLY LAID LITTLE YELLOW STRIPS IN THE MANGER FOR STRAW... SMALL SQUARES OF FLANNEL, CUT FROM A WORN-OUT NIGHTGOWN WERE USED FOR THE BABY'S BLANKET.....*

*A DOLL-LIKE BABY WAS CUT FROM TAN FELT WHICH THE MISSIONARIES HAD ALSO BROUGHT WITH THEM.....*

*IT WAS ALL GOING SMOOTLY UNTIL ONE OF THE MISSIONARIES SAT DOWN AT A TABLE TO HELP A 6 YR. OLD BOY NAMED MISHA...*

*HE HAD FINISHED HIS MANGER....*

*THEN THE MISSIONARY LOOKED AT THE LITTLE BOY'S MANGER.....*

*SHE WAS STARTLED TO SEE NOT ONE, BUT TWO BABIES IN THE MANGER...*

*(PERHAPS MARY HAD TWINS)*

*QUICKLY, SHE CALLED FOR THE TRANSLATOR TO ASK MISHA WHY THERE WERE TWO BABIES IN THE MANGER....*

*CROSSING HIS ARMS IN FRONT OF HIM AND LOOKING AT THE COMPLETED MANGER SCENE, MISHA BEGAN TO REPEAT THE STORY VERY SERIOUSLY....*

*FOR A 6 YR. OLD BOY, WHO HAD ONLY HEARD THE CHRISTMAS STORY ONCE, HE RELATED THE HAPPENINGS ACCURATELY UNTIL HE CAME TO THE PART WHERE MARY PUT THE BABY JESUS IN THE MANGER....*

***THEN MISHA STARTED TO AD-LIB.....***

***HE MADE UP HIS OWN ENDING....***

***HE SAID, "AND WHEN MARIA LAID THE BABY IN THE MANGER, JESUS  
LOOKED AT ME AND ASKED ME IF I HAD A PLACE TO STAY.....***

***I TOLD HIM I HAVE NO MOMMA AND I HAVE NO PAPA, SO, I DON'T HAVE  
ANY PLACE TO STAY....***

***THEN JESUS TOLD ME THAT I COULD STAY WITH HIM.....***

***BUT, I TOLD HIM I COULDN'T BECAUSE I DIDN'T HAVE A GIFT TO GIVE  
HIM LIKE THE SHEPHERDS AND THE MAGI DID....***

***BUT, I WANTED TO STAY WITH JESUS SO MUCH..***

***SO, I THOUGHT ABOUT WHAT I HAD THAT MAYBE I COULD USE FOR A  
GIFT...***

***I THOUGHT MAYBE IF I KEP HIM, WARM, THAT WOULD BE A GOOD GIFT...***

***SO, I ASKED JESUS, "IF I KEEP YOU WARM, WILL THAT BE A GOOD  
ENOUGH GIFT?"***

***AND JESUS TOLD ME....***

***"IF YOU KEEP ME WARM, THAT WILL BE THE BEST GIFT ANYBODY EVER  
GAVE ME"***

***"SO I GOT INTO THE MANGER AND JESUS LOOKED AT ME AND HE TOLD  
ME I COULD STAY WITH HIM - FOR ALWAYS."***

***AS LITTLE MISHA FINISHED HIS STORY, HIS EYES BRIMMED FULL OF  
TEARS THAT FLOWED DOWN HIS LITTLE CHEEKS...***

***PUTTING HIS HAND OVER HIS FACE, HIS HEAD DROPPED TO THE TABLE***

*AND HIS SHOULDERS SHOOK AS HE SOBBED...*

*THE LITTLE ORPHAN HAD FOUND SOMEONE WHO WOULD NEVER  
ABANDON HIM OR ABUSE HIM, SOMEONE WHO WOULD STAY WITH HIM -  
ALWAYS....*

*OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF BABES.....MISHA GOT IT DIDN'T HE?*

*AN OPEN AND VULNERABLE JESUS*

*A WARM, A FAITHFUL AND MERCIFUL FACE....*

*CHRIST IS THE MERCIFUL FACE OF OUR GOD.....*

*HE WILL RECEIVE WHATEVER WE HAVE TO OFFER HIM AS A GIFT -  
MOST ESPECIALLY THE GIFT OF OURSELVES*

*FRANCIS OUR POPE IS TELLING US THE SAME THING DURING THE  
JUBILEE YEAR OF MERCY THAT THE CHRIST IS THE MERCIFUL FACE OF  
OUR GOD.....*

*FOR ME WHAT IS ALSO SO STRIKING ABOUT THIS STORY IS ITS LOCATION  
IT TAKES PLACE IN THE MIDST OF DARKNESS....LIKE OUR READINGS  
100 ABANDONED AND ABUSED RUSSIAN CHILDREN....*

*THAT IS DARKNESS....DEEP DARKNESS.....*

*THAT IS ALSO WHERE THE MERCY OF GOD SEEMS TO ALWAYS SHOW UP...  
LIGHT IN THE MIDST OF DARKNESS, DEEP DARKNESS....*

*MERCY IN THE MIDST OF OUR DARKNESS*

*AND AS WE PRAYED IN OUR OPENING CANDLELIGHT PRAYER -*

*MAY THE CHRIST LIGHT SHINE IN ME....I.E. IN MY DARKNESS*

*AND THAT IS WHAT WE CELEBRATE THIS EVENING -*

*THE LIGHT SHINING IN THE MIDST OF OUR DARKNESS -*

*THE FACE OF MERCY IN THE MIDST OF OUR DARKNESS*

*NO MATTER HOW DARK*

*POPE FRANCIS SEEMED TO BE POINTING THAT OUT TO US RECENTLY*

*WHEN HE OPENED THIS JUBILEE YEAR OF MERCY IN A RATHER UNIQUE  
MANNER....*

*ALWAYS THROUGHOUT HISTORY A JUBILEE YEAR HAS UNFAILINGLY*

*BEGUN WITH THE OPENING OF A DOOR IN A BASILICA IN ROME*

*ALWAYS.....*

*NOT THIS YEAR, NOT THIS POPE..*

*EVEN THOUGH IT WASN'T COVERED MUCH IN THE U.S. PRESS....*

*HE OPENED THIS YEAR OF MERCY....ON THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT  
IN BANGUI, THE CAPITAL OF THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC...*

*AS HE SAID, "TODAY BANGUI BECOMES THE SPIRITUAL CAPITAL OF THE  
WORLD".*

*THE ATTENTION OF THE WORLD WAS NOT FOCUSED ON A CELEBRATED  
ROMAN BASILICA BUT ON A LESSER-KNOWN CHURCH IN A POOR, WAR-  
TORN COUNTRY....*

*IT EXEMPLIFIED THIS POPE'S DESIRE FOR THE CHURCH TO GO TO THE  
MARGINS....*

*TO BRING LIGHT TO THE DARKNESS -*

*JUST CHRIST BROUGHT LIGHT AND THE FACE OF MERCY TO OUR  
DARKENED WORLD SOME 2,000 YRS AGO...*

*ANOTHER THING THAT FRANCIS SAID EARLIER, I THINK, IS IMPORTANT FOR ME IN REGARDS TO LIGHT AND DARKNESS....*

*FAITH IS "NOT A LIGHT THAT DISPELS ALL DARKNESS, BUT RATHER A LAMP THAT GUIDES OUR STEPS IN THE NIGHT AND THAT IS SUFFICIENT" SO LET US ACKNOWLEDGE THAT NEITHER THE BIRTH OF CHRIST, NOR OUR FAITH REMOVES COMPLETELY THE DARKNESS - WE STILL HAVE DARKNESS - AND OFTEN IT SURROUNDS US - BUT THE BIRTH OF CHRIST AND OUR FAITH IN CHRIST JESUS - DOES INDEED PROVIDE FOR US A LAMP - A LIGHT TO GUIDE OUR STEPS....*

*IN THE MIDST OF THE DARKNESS.....*

*WHETHER IT BE PERSONAL OR GLOBAL DARKNESS.....*

*LET US MAKE USE OF THAT LAMP - LET THAT LAMP IN THE MIDST OF OUR FEAR AND ANXIETY GIVE US COURAGE AND TRUST, JOY AND HOPE WE CAN SEE THE PATH AND WE CAN WALK THE PATH WITH THAT LAMP THAT LAMP CAN ALSO FUEL OUR HOPE AND OUR CHARITY AS WE WALK THE PATH....*

*LET US CALL UPON THAT FAITH, THAT LIGHT, THAT FACE OF MERCY IN THIS EUCHARIST....ESP. AS WE APPROACH THE ALTAR*

*LET US PRAY AS WE DID EARLIER-"MAY THE CHRIST LIGHT SHINE IN ME" AND IN THE DARKNESS....*