

There's something very personal, even intimate, about singing "Happy Birthday to You." Unlike the rather limited number of songs we may have memorized, it is generally the only song we know that is directed to a particular individual. Except for a restaurant or church setting — in which a whole gang of people may cheerfully join in, even if they don't know what name to insert— those who sing Happy Birthday generally know the birthday boy or girl very well. It's personal that way.

Of course, we do remember and observe the birthdays of people we don't even know personally, mainly because of the holidays associated with them — George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr. — but if it weren't for the fact that we get a day off from work, even those individuals would probably escape our attention. The other big public birthday party that is observed by people all over the world is, of course, Christmas! Ironically though, nobody knows when Jesus' real birthday was. December 25th was chosen by the early church, several generations later, as a way to blunt the impact of Roman winter solstice celebrations. As the pagans celebrated the coming of the sun, Christians celebrated the birth of the Son of Righteousness.

The people who were there at the true birthday of Jesus — whenever that may have been — would have known him very well indeed. The only family members present were Mary and Joseph, but, tipped off by an angel, various and sundry strangers show up. Hard-living shepherds stumbling down from their high pastures, an angelic army arrayed in the heavens, and later (according to Matthew), a few bewildered astrologers from the East arrive — but the scene in the Bethlehem stable is astonishingly low-key and intimate, considering the fact that the birthday boy lying in the manger will grow up to be the Savior of the world! And there is a birthday song for him, but it's not "Happy Birthday to You," rather it's "Gloria in Excelsis Deo."

So how do Mary and Joseph receive this newborn child? Is his birth a joyous celebration, or a burden? After all, not every birthday is a cause for joy. Sure...most births are happy occasions, because even the most anxious, impoverished mother typically finds some way to put worry aside and marvel at the gift of new life cradled in her arms. But, as we journey through the years of our lives, and as birthdays pile on top of each other, many of us greet the day with resentment or even dread, especially when the number of candles on our cake are too numerous to count.

This morning, in our Gospel story, as Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth, she sings her own birthday song: an anthem of God's triumph that is not without its dark themes — the scattering of the proud, the fall of kings. What a burden she has to bear! Yet, what a blessing she discerns in the midst of it all. And, despite that truth, it still isn't too hard for us to imagine that Jesus' birthday was a burden for Mary and Joseph, no doubt about it.

The news of Mary's pregnancy during her betrothal period set off a minor scandal. It nearly led to a breakup of her relationship with Joseph. As so often happens with awkward pregnancies everywhere, Mary travels away from home for a while. Whether her parents arrange to have her sent away, or whether she undertakes the journey on her own, no one knows. It could very well be that everyone needs to get a little distance from each other to sort out the divine ambiguous news she has received from an angel, a mixture of joy and anxiety.

Fortunately for Mary, she has somewhere to go, a place where she can be assured of a warm welcome. Her older cousin Elizabeth is also expecting. Whatever her neighbors in Nazareth may have been whispering behind her back, she knows she and Elizabeth will have much to talk about. And when Mary arrives at her cousin's house, Elizabeth receives her with the warmest possible greeting: "Blessed are you..." It's not the sort of thing people typically say to an unmarried,

pregnant, teenage mother. No, the people around such a young woman are more likely to say, “Cursed are you. Cursed are you, to have brought such a fate down upon yourself and upon your family.”

Elizabeth, however, has no such reservations. She welcomes her kinswoman with open arms. She blesses her! More than that, Elizabeth treats Mary as her social superior, despite their difference in age: “And why has this happened to me that the mother of my Lord comes to me?” The very fact that Elizabeth’s own unborn child leaps in her womb, is an early sign of what the adult John the Baptist will one day say of his cousin Jesus: “He must increase, and I must decrease.”

Of course, Mary’s not the only one who can sense the blessing that the birth of her son will bring to the world. Elizabeth does too! Between the two of them, they have more than enough faith to see this thing through, giving life to both Jesus and John: two men who, between them, will change the lives of countless people on this earth! It couldn’t have happened, though, without the faithful vision of Mary and Elizabeth, enabling them to bear the burden of a rather unique and miraculous birthday.

It’s not always an easy thing to glimpse God’s promise in these days before Christmas. It’s so much easier to see the things the world is fond of seeing this time of year. As all of us know, the promise of the secular Christmas is merrymaking, without true joy. It’s a profusion of material goods, bereft of spiritual values. It’s a frantic scurrying of people grasping for things they don’t have, all the while **failing** to celebrate gifts of the Spirit they’ve already been offered in abundance. Faced with the onslaught of Christmas materialism, it’s easy for good, Christian people to get discouraged during the holidays. We all do and sometimes we complain.

*We complain about Christmas trees going up in department stores before Halloween. * We complain that “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” and “I Saw

Mommy Kissing Santa Claus” so often seems to drown out “O Come, All Ye Faithful” and “Silent Night.” *We complain that what we consider to be a very holy day has been hijacked by a rather secular holiday that the people around us appear to be celebrating.

Well, these things are all true observations, but if we let our distaste for yuletide materialism eclipse the spiritual meaning of Christmas, then the materialists have won. The birthday of our Lord will have become a burden. Far better to go through these few remaining days of Advent smiling with amusement at the tinsel excess all around us — all the while remaining attentive to the true gold that glimmers only briefly and can be discovered only by those who truly and earnestly seek it!

Well known Christian author, and Pastor, Barbara Brown Taylor talks about certain traces of God that can be observed in the world around us, if only we open our eyes. She says, “The same pattern of rebirth that I learned in baptism showed up in everything from bathing to watering plants. The same pattern of relationship that I learned in communion was available in every meal eaten mindfully. The laying-on of hands took place as I held a crying baby or rubbed the shoulders of a tired friend. When I walked outside and looked at the smoking compost heap, I saw a sacrament of death turning into life. When I used my little bottle of White-Out to correct a mistake, I remembered that my errors did not have to be permanent. Everywhere I turned, the most insignificant things in this world were preaching little sermons to me. Everywhere I turned, the world was leaking light.”

So how might we teach this sort of spiritual discernment to others? Another theologian, Dorothy Bass, tells the story of a mother who has a rather wonderful way of teaching her children to be attentive to signs of God’s activity around them. At the end of each day, instead of asking her young kids, “How was your day?” or something similar, she asks them instead, “Where did you meet God today?” And

they tell her, one by one: “a teacher helped me when I was struggling with an assignment, there was a homeless person in the park, I saw a tree with lots of flowers on it...” She tells them where she met God, too, and before her children fall asleep; the people, the things, the places, and the experiences of their day, become the substance of their nightly prayers. We can do much the same thing in these swiftly-passing days before Christmas. We need only ask ourselves, “Where can I meet God in this?” and we may be pleasantly surprised at how often God pops up.

Even the tackiest, most materialistic holiday observances have at their base a deep yearning for the good, the kind, the beautiful. Better to **affirm the good that’s present**, than to lose ourselves in our complaining and in our criticism! It’s a sure-fire way to make the birthday of Jesus a blessing, not a burden. In the words of Luke, blessed are you, O Mary, “who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken ... by the Lord.”

Blessed are you, as well, if you are able to walk through these final days of Advent with eyes wide open to the signs of God’s presence — and God’s promise — all around! Despite the pain, or the heartache, or the loneliness, or the loss, our creator and redeemer promises to be with us always! And not only is that promise featured in His name, Immanuel, God with us, but it is also demonstrated by followers like us who seek to be the hands, the feet, and the presence of Jesus to the world during these dark and difficult times. So let’s do all that we can to help others see and experience God as we have. Amen.