As we come into the fourth week of Advent, and celebrate Christmas this coming Wednesday, how are you? I can think of several words that might apply: frazzled, excited, exhausted, joyful, anxious, peaceful, melancholic, and reflective. As I look over the past four weeks, I think I could identify with all those words I cited. I also might add I am few pounds heavier from attending some lovely Christmas gatherings.

I enjoyed my first Advent here at St. Mary’s. There has been just enough cold in the air to make it feel like winter. The slight dusting of snow was nice, but please Lord let the snow stay away during our Christmas Masses. I am not a big fan of the song Let it Snow, Let it snow, Let it snow. Having once lived ten years near Erie, Pa., I know all about lake effect snow.

It was a blessing to celebrate the Sacrament of the Sick two weeks ago at a Mass, to be part of three Advent prayer services, and to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation with the school children. I re-read one of my favorite Christmas books, Seeing Haloes by John Shea. I even went street preaching with some parishioners and experience some warm greetings and some grumpy stares. I read the story of the Grinch Who Stole Christmas at Barnes and Noble for the school children, and absolutely loved the kindergarten Christmas pageant with the heavenly host of children dressed as angels, holy shepherds, reverent and Joseph, exotic Kings from the East and wonderful songs.

Among all these highlights, I think I would rate number one, the celebration of the Feast of St. Nicholas at St. Mary’s School. There is the tradition of having the children put outside their classrooms their shoes. St. Nicholas is welcomed into the building (I had that dramatic role over the PA system) the eighth graders then hurriedly place a candy cane in each of the shoes, and then the children are invited out to get their shoes. I stood outside and watched the pre-K (four year olds) come out to their shoes. I can only describe their reaction as pure joy. They were jumping up and down with sheer delight. I jumped with them but they got off of the ground a bit higher than did I. You would have thought there was a million dollars in each shoe. I had the thought the precious children will get lovely gifts for Christmas from Mr. Claus and their families, but I could not imagine them any happier than the moment of getting their candy cane. They were with each and just so happy. O, seeing the innocence of children is a blessing. Your own spirits rise up with theirs.

So, I offer you two simple thoughts to you and to me: 1) try to enter into the joy of the birth of Jesus. God became a human being, the word made flesh, because he loved us so much. Seek to enter the awe and wonder of this truth. Do your best to enjoy all the moments of these Christmas days: each Christmas card, each gift, the taste of every cookies, the lights that surround us, and the gift of one another. 2) Catholic churches are filled on Christmas Eve. Parking can be a hassle and finding a seat in a pew difficult. We regulars may wonder where have these folks been all year. There can be a temptation to resent their presence, but I say how blessed we are that they have come to celebrate the birth of Christmas. All are welcome at the stable.