



With tomorrow being Christmas Eve, this fourth Sunday of Advent leaves us with a challenge: how do enter into Advent with Christmas upon us? It is hard for me to not be distracted by my thinking about the Christmas Masses, hoping for good weather, the Christmas pageant, and looking forward to being with my family for a few days. I am sure you may be thinking about did you miss anybody on your gift list, do you have the food ready for the dinner of the seven fishes, do you need more wrapping paper, will there be traffic if you are visiting family on Christmas Day, and what will your strategy be to find a parking spot here at St, Martin's on tomorrow night. And if you are a child, and we all are at Christmas, what gifts can we expect.

For the past several years, I have gone to the Knights of Columbus Christmas party at the Hartigan Manor. Besides saying a Christmas blessing, I am called upon to lead all the Knights and their guests in a *dramatic Singing of the Twelve Days of Christmas*. I call upon each the people at each table to sing a verse and to express the words in gestures. So, have people trying to look like *a partridge in a pear tree, four calling birds, and eight maids a milking, and twelve drummers drumming*. It is quite a production and lots of fun, and I am such a ham that I can lead the song with the world's worst singing voice. It is a great party song. It has been pointed out that this seemingly funny song was used by Catholics during times of religious persecution as a way on holding onto the faith. Just to mention two of the symbolic meanings: Jesus, it is said is the partridge in the pear tree, which bring to mind his death on the cross, and the twelve drummers drumming are the apostles spreading the good news of the Gospel.

I am thinking about the twelve days of Christmas and how quickly they pass. December 26th is the day of half price sales on Christmas cards and wrapping paper, and on December 27, we begin to see the stores putting up Valentine's Day's decorations. Once Christmas passes, New Year's Day dominates for a few days, but it is to my mind a very secular holiday that does not do much for me. Just as we have celebrated four weeks of Advent, we are now not celebrating a day, but a season in our liturgy. We are invited to celebrate and rejoice not for a day but for a season because we are so in awe and wonder at the God becoming man. Traditionally, the days of Christmas would be between Christmas and the Great Feast of the Epiphany, when the star brings the Magi to the stable of Jesus. Epiphany is on January 6th and thus the twelve days between the 25th of December and the 6th of January. However, the church moves the Feast of the Epiphany to the second Sunday after Christmas so people are able to attend what is sometimes called Little Christmas. Finally, one more curve, the Sunday after Epiphany marks the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan and this day is really the end of the Christmas season, so we get some extra days to celebrate. If you tell this to your boss at work, he or she will give you those extra days off from work. Now you may be sitting here saying to yourself, thank you Father for the lesson on liturgy but I have wrapping to do and cookies to bake so what is your point. A fair question.

My message is to try to truly enjoy the moments of the Christmas season: the innocence of the children opening their gifts from Santa, sit by your Christmas tree, sip a hot chocolate or a Jamison, admire your tree and enjoy being with one another, take your children or grandchildren to the parish nativity set and tell them about the baby who loves them so much, re-read your Christmas cards, visit friends and family, make phone calls to those who are not able to be at home, savor that Christmas cookie, enjoy the Christmas music. I said Christmas is not a day but a season. You and I live in a time when Christ has come. We are not waiting for him. He has sent his Holy Spirit to be with us. Jesus is Emmanuel which means *God with us*. He is with us in a profound way here at the Mass and in the Holy Eucharist, in all our Sacraments, in our relationships with one another, in all the joys and sorrows of life, he is with us. Today, in our Gospel, when the

Archangel Gabriel reveals to Mary that she is to be the mother of God, that she is full of grace, the presence of the divine is in her womb, she rushes off to help her older cousin Elizabeth with her own pregnancy. She must share the news with others. Grace leads her to want to help another, to share love and life. Every day of the year is a day of grace, but the power of the many symbols of this season makes it even more evident. The poet W.H. wrote, *when grace comes, you have to dance*. Grace has come to us in Christ. Let us joyfully dance.