

Father O'Connor's Homily for 22 December 2024  
Fourth Sunday of Advent-C

Micah 5: 1-4a  
Hebrews 10: 5-10  
Luke 1: 39-45

*Last December 2023, in anticipation of my 75th birthday on 3 June 2024, I volunteered to remain as your pastor for an extra year at Saint Joseph and Nativity Parishes, which Bishop Malesic granted. This extra year comes to a conclusion on my 76th birthday on this coming 3 June 2025.*

*Last month I volunteered to remain as pastor of both parishes for an additional extra year, which the Bishop has granted. This additional year will come to a conclusion on my 77th birthday on 3 June 2026.*

*I am very grateful to the Lord for blessing me with the health and stamina to continue in active ministry. I am blessed with two wonderful parishes, and I appreciate the warm and welcoming "parish family feel" that is so evident in Saint Joseph and Nativity Parishes.*

*I am very happy that the Bishop has approved my spending this next year-and-a-half with all of you. And I hope that you are happy too!*

Children are really something. There was a mother and father who had a two-year-old son. They lived in Chicago in a high-rise apartment on the 42<sup>nd</sup> floor.

Every morning the father would hug and kiss his wife and little boy goodbye and then get in the elevator right across the hall. And every evening his little boy would be standing in the doorway of the apartment, ready to greet his dad when the elevator doors opened.

Some years later, this boy was able to verbalize to his mom and dad what he had thought had been going on. He had believed that his dad left the apartment every morning, spent the day in the elevator, and then at night came out again for dinner with his family.

Well, that was a two-year-old's perception. Children are really something!

We hear in the Gospel today about two babies in the womb who are not only "really something" – they mean everything to us in God's plan for our salvation.

The Gospel tells us about two expectant mothers. Mary was carrying God's eternal divine Son, Jesus, in her womb. And Mary's older relative, Elizabeth, was carrying John the Baptist in her womb. John would later point out Jesus as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

Both of these pregnancies were so important that they had been announced by the Angel Gabriel. Gabriel's coming to Mary and asking her to be the mother of God's Son is the first Joyful Mystery of the Rosary, the Annunciation.

Today's Gospel is the scene of the second Joyful Mystery, the Visitation. Mary goes in haste to visit Elizabeth and to assist her with her pregnancy. When Mary arrives, Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, is the first person to announce the arrival of the Messiah: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy."

John, still a baby in Elizabeth's womb, also recognized Jesus, still a baby in Mary's womb.

Elizabeth was in the sixth month of her pregnancy, so Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months, until John the Baptist was born.

Mary and Elizabeth were joyful about their pregnancies, even though they were both untimely. Mary conceived God's Son through the power and intervention of the Holy Spirit while she was engaged to Joseph and before they lived together. Elizabeth was beyond the age when women would normally have children. She conceived her son with her up-in-years husband, Zechariah, through God's personal intervention.

Mary and Elizabeth were women of faith, but their faith did not insulate them from the sorrows of life. In the end, both of their sons would die at an early age. John the Baptist was about thirty-three when he was beheaded in prison by King Herod. Jesus was also about thirty-three when He died on the cross at Calvary for our salvation. But through all the sorrows in their lives, Mary and Elizabeth trusted in God and in His love for them.

Marie Pemberton wrote about her son, Jeremy, who died from leukemia at the age of four. They lived next door to another couple who also had a four-year-old son named Christopher. And Christopher and Jeremy were best buddies.

After Jeremy died, Marie found it very difficult to be around Christopher because he reminded her so much of Jeremy. One day Christopher asked Marie, “Why did Jeremy die?” Marie could not bring herself to attempt an answer, so she told Christopher to go home and ask his mother. And he did. It was the month of June.

In December, Marie and her husband decided to soft-pedal Christmas this time around. And then Ellie, Christopher’s mother, invited Marie to come over for coffee and to see their Christmas decorations. Marie was hesitant but finally accepted.

When they got in the house, Ellie said, “Marie, what I really want to show you is our nativity scene.” Marie noticed that it looked alright, except that there were two babies in the manger.

And Ellie explained: “Remember last summer when you told Christopher to ask me why Jeremy had died? The best I could do was to tell him that Jeremy is now with Jesus in heaven.

“So when we were putting up the nativity set and placing Jesus in the manger, Christopher got one of his little sister’s baby dolls and put it in the manger next to Jesus. We asked him why he did this, and Christopher said that ‘the doll was like Jeremy: Jeremy is now with Jesus.’”

Marie said that this was a turning point in her grieving. It did not take away the pain, but it did help to put it in perspective. That four-year-old theologian named Christopher had helped her understand that Jesus was born in Bethlehem so that we could be with Him forever in heaven.

Jeremy is now with Jesus. Yes, children are really something!

As I look around this church today, I know that some of you are missing someone very badly this Christmas. Perhaps someone that you love is not with you now because God has called them home to heaven. But this can still be a very special Christmas for you – as it was for Marie.

Why did Jesus come into our world? He was born to die for our sins and save us, so that we could be with Him forever in heaven. That is our faith.

We see two women of great faith in today’s Gospel – Mary and Elizabeth. Their faith did not protect them from suffering, but it brought them the grace and the strength to get through it.

And through God’s grace, the faith of Mary and Elizabeth, the faith of Marie and Christopher can be ours too.

Jeremy is now with Jesus. And Jesus is with us.

Emmanuel – God with us – is His name and His promise.