

Sermon, Dec. 24, 2017 Christmas Eve morning

For the children..... the tradition of giving out a piece of straw

In a book called *God With Us: Rediscovering the Meaning of Christmas*, I learned that St. Francis of Assisi was the first to have a manger built in Greccio, Italy in 1223...

And I also learned that there is a French tradition where in preparing the crèche, children are given a piece of straw for every prayer or act of kindness that they perform during the whole time of Advent....and then they place it in the crèche.

What a beautiful idea that with every piece of straw...you are preparing a bed for baby Jesus to be born....AND with every act of kindness you do...you are preparing your hearts for Christ's Spirit to be born in you!

So....each of you have a piece of straw in your bulletin...I ask you to think of a special act of kindness that you could do...today...it might be helping someone with a task that is hard for them, or making a card for a neighbor...or saving a little money for a good cause...or even just smiling at someone or caring especially nicely for a pet....

Think for a moment what your act of kindness might be....

And then....you can either come and place your piece of straw in the manger...or you can take it with you to remind you to do this kind thing...

Remembering that doing kind things, prepares our hearts for the Spirit of Christ to be born in us!

A story: Since this is Christmas Eve day and I will be sharing a homily this evening as well, I decided to read you a Christmas story.

I went looking for Christmas Story books in a couple of bookstores...I was told in one, "those kind of things are in the children's section"....where *Rudolf the Red-nosed Reindeer* seemed to dominate.... Lord help us, if the appreciation for good Christmas stories has gone by the wayside....so I dug

out all the Christmas books we have at home and read a lot of stories...and actually chose one by Norman Vincent Peale, called "A Gift from the Heart" about an young immigrant girl who buys a dress for a poor baby instead of buying something for the wealthy family she works for who already had everything... it is a touching story... but when I started tell it, it felt condescending in the way it was written....

So I decided to look for something outside of the Norman Rockwell nostalgia realm...and find a Christmas story from a totally different culture and place. I found this story by an African American preacher in North Carolina...who tells a true story about one Christmas Eve in his home country of Ghana... It is called:

The Night Before Christmas: An African Christmas Story

By Peter E. Adotey Addo

It was the night before Christmas in Ghana and I was sad. My family life had been severely disrupted and I was sure that Christmas would never come. There was none of the usual joy and anticipation that Christmas brought. I was eight years old, but in the past few months I had grown a great deal.

Before this year, Christmas in my Ghanaian village was one of the joyous religious festivals. It was the time for beautiful Christmas music on the streets and everywhere. Christmas had always been a religious celebration and the church started preparing way back in November. We really felt that we were preparing for the birth of the baby Jesus.

Christmas was the time when relatives and friends visited each other so there were always people traveling with great joy from all the different ethnic groups. I always thought that was what Christmas was all about.

How I wished I now had some of the traditional food eaten at Christmas. I remembered the taste of rice, chicken, goat, lamb, and fruits of various kinds. The houses were always decorated; the children and all the young people loved to make and decorate their homes and schools with colorful crepe paper.

And Christmas Eve at our church was so special. After the service there would be a joyous procession through the streets with local musicians playing their music.

Then on Christmas Day we all went back to church to read the scriptures and sing carols to remind us of the meaning of the blessed birth of the baby Jesus. This is what Christmas meant to us.

Then came gifts of special chocolate, cookies and crackers; new clothes and perhaps new pairs of shoes. Throughout the celebration everyone was greeted this way: "Afishapa," the Akan word meaning "Merry Christmas and Happy New Year." Afishapa.....Oh how I wish that those memories were real tonight in order to bring us Christmas.

But this year was drastically different. I thought Christmas could not be possible. Last April the so-called Army of Liberation attacked our village. Families were separated and some were even killed. We were forced to march and walk for many miles without food. We were often so very hungry. The soldiers burned everything in our village.

Miraculously we were able to get away during one rainy night. After several weeks in the tropical forest we made our way back to our burned out village. Most of us were sick. Most of the members of our families were nowhere to be found. We had no idea even what day or time it was.

Then my grandmother noticed the reddish and yellow flower we call "Fire on the Mountain" blooming in the middle of the marketplace where the tree had bloomed for generations only at Christmas time. We were surprised that the fires not destroy this blooming tree! What a miracle it was. Grandmother told us it must be Christmas because the flower was blooming. My spirits were lifted a little bit.

But, how could we celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace when since April we have not known any peace, only war and suffering? As I continued to think about past joyous Christmases and the present suffering, we heard the horns of some cars as they approached our village. At first we thought they were cars full of men with machine guns so we hid in the forest. To our surprise they were not soldiers.

They were ordinary travelers. The bridge over the river near our village had been destroyed when the soldiers left. Since it was almost dusk and there were rumors that there were land mines on the roads, these travelers took a detour that led them straight to our village.

When they saw us they were shocked and horrified at the suffering and the devastation all around us. Many of these travelers began to cry. They confirmed that tonight was really Christmas Eve. All of them were on their way to their villages to celebrate with family and friends. They shared the little food they had with us. They even helped us to build a fire in the center of the marketplace to keep us warm.

In the middle of all this my oldest sister who was expecting a baby, became ill and could not stand up. My sister had been in a state of shock and speechless since we all escaped from the soldiers.

I was so afraid for her because we did not have any medical supplies and we were not near a hospital. Some of the travelers and the villagers removed their shirts and clothes to make a bed for my sister to lie near the fire we had made. On that fateful night my sister gave birth to a beautiful baby boy.

This called for a celebration, war or no war. Africans have to dance and we celebrated until the rooster crowed at 6 a.m. We sang Christmas songs. Every one sang in his or her own language. For the first time all the pain and agony of the past few months went away.

When morning finally came my sister was asked, "What are you going to name the baby?" Would you believe for the first time since our village was burned, she spoke. She said, "His name is "Gye Nyame," which means "With God, I fear no one."

And so we celebrated Christmas that night. It came in the generosity of visitors and in the birth of my nephew in the midst of our suffering. This birth turned out to be the universal story of how bad things can turn into hope...the same hope that was brought to us in the birth of Jesus.

A miracle occurred that night and all of a sudden I knew we were not alone any more. Christmas came even to our Ghanaian village that night. Christmas is always within us all.

Amen....

I wish you all a truly meaningful and beautiful Christmas...

Merry Christmas and God bless us all in this world, together!