**Christmas 2009, "You Can Make It."**

You and I are the last to worship this Christmas morning. This is the last Christmas Mass for the day. I arrived here from Boston on Wednesday, where I had been studying during the fall semester. Images of the Boston Marathon float in my mind, especially the images of those last runners who cross the finish line long after everyone else has done so. Yet, people remain lining the streets and cheering on the last runners, exhorting them with every step to finish the race. I suppose that is one of my jobs this morning, to exhort, encourage, and praise you for having run through the gauntlet of Christmas preparations and activities to where you have crossed the front doors of this Church and have arrived at the finish line, so to speak; here in Church where we still remember the reason for the season. We made it.

The Catholic theologian John Shea, in his book Starlight - a masterful collection of Christmas reflections – tells the story about how he was in the parking lot of a retail store just three days before Christmas. A woman was hoisting a bag of groceries out of her car and into her trunk. As she was doing so, she repeatedly muttered, "I'm not going to make it. I'm not going to make it." As John Shea passed her by, he said, "You're going to make it. You're going to make it." He was rather proud of his double response of assurance countering her double expressions of impending failure. Well, she stuck her head out from the trunk and with a look on her face that said, "What the heck do you know." She was adamant and said, "I'm not going to make it!"

John Shea goes on to reflect on what the "it" represents. He says the "it" can be getting everything done, surviving the season, avoiding a breakdown, and not yelling at fellow motorists, salespeople, or your loved ones. "It" can also mean getting into the Christmas spirit. "I'm not going to make it" could mean, "Christmas is not going to happen for me." The prescribed feelings of peace, love, and joy are going to clash with my feelings of frustration, fragmentation, and depression. Maybe some of us crossed the front doors this morning thinking, "This is my last chance to capture something of what the birth of Christ is all about." You need to be here. You made it just in time. It's the last Mass for the day.

I would like you to do the following: First, I would like you to take in all of the Christmas decorations: the colors (the greens, the whites, the reds). Look around. Aren't they beautiful? Second, I want you to listen to, sing along, and enjoy the Christmas hymns. They take on an added beauty and joy when children sing them. Pay attention to the words in the hymns: there might be a word, a thought, or an image that warms your heart.

Now, I want you to be as quiet as you can. I want to reflect on one of the images from today's readings: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came through him, and nothing came to be without him. What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." "Shhhh!" The creator of the universe, your maker, took on our human nature even to the point of becoming an infant. That is extraordinary when you stop to think about it. Don't try to figure it out. Just sit with that thought: hold it in your imagination like an infant in your arms.

You may realize this but every celebration of the Eucharist is a celebration of Christmas! In a few moments, I will pray what we call the Eucharistic Prayer, during which the bread and wine will become the body and blood of Christ. When you look upon the consecrated bread and wine, now the body and blood of Christ on the altar, I want you to look upon them as if you were at the original manger scene. Christ is as present now as he was to the shepherds that first Christmas evening. We have already greeted his arrival when we joined the angels and sang, "Glory to God in the highest!" When you come forward, and the priest or Eucharistic minister extends their arms toward you with the body of Christ, imagine the little arms of the infant Jesus reaching out to you to be taken into your love.

What does all this mean: the colors, the decorations, the vestments, the prayers, the hymns, the images? It means that with the birth of Christ, a new power is unleashed in the world. This power, revealed in life, death, and resurrection, has a name. It is called love, and it reveals who God is. God is love. Don't try to analyze it. Just accept it as you would a newborn babe in your arms and let the world's cares recede into the background for a few brief moments. It is akin to a runner getting her "second wind."

When you leave the front doors to return to your homes and work, what was the finish line now becomes the starting line. Things will begin to speed up again. But remember, "You're going to make it. You're going to make it."