Homily for the Vigil of the Feast of the Nativity
St. Joseph's Church
Globeville in Denver, CO
December 24th, 2017

Isaiah 62:1-5
Psalm 89:4-5, 16-17, 27, 29
Acts 13:16-17, 22-25
Matthew 1:1-25

"But in this place of which you say is a waste, there will be heard again the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness ... the voices of those who sing" (Jeremiah 33:11. Quoted by Father Greg Boyle, S.J., in Tattoos on the Heart, 212). A couple of very wrong ideas have taken root in the world and, sadly, have found some fertile soil in our time. The first is this: there just might be lives out there that matter less than other lives. The second is intimately related to the first: God's love is just like our love.

What Jesus taught us was that no life is of more value to God than another life; God loves each and all infinitely, tenderly. Jews matter not more than Samaritans, Catholics not more than Lutherans, Muslims not more than Hindus. It is striking that Jesus was born in Bethlehem in poverty, darkness, and rejection. The poor and marginalized are God's beloved. Why do we so often forget that?

During his whole life, Jesus' voice sang in mirth and gladness; he embodied a love beyond words that touched hearts and honored the dignity of each person he encountered as a child of God. Jesus healed and freed and encouraged as only God can. He was God's love in the flesh.

Matthew's genealogy of Jesus can seem tedious but it reveals our deepest beliefs, our lived understanding of the love of God and how different our way of loving seems at times. Five women are named in this very patriarchal genealogy: Tamar, Rahab, Bathsheba (the wife of Uriah the Hittite), Ruth, and Mary of Nazareth, the mother of Jesus. These few women are sprinkled through the three sets of fourteen generations. Why? Each woman is a surprise, a disruptor of the usual intentions of human beings (men, really) by a passionate God who would heal and save humanity by any and all means. Three were prostitutes or accused of prostitution, one was an adulterer, two were aliens, that is foreigners who were despised, and one, Mary, was thought to have betrayed her betrothed Joseph. It is into the midst of human longing and human messiness that our God enters to save.
"The plain humanity of Christmas is what it is all about, our lives and God's. In the last analysis we are as defenseless as a child before the great forces of time and consciousness. What is more, we are reminded that our very God, as well, is somehow like a child, defenseless before us. Perhaps that is why the heavenly advice so often given in the infancy narratives is 'fear not' (Kavanaugh, *The Word Encountered*, 12).

There is much to ponder here ... The gifts of God are without repentance, that is, God does not take them back; Jesus' gratitude to his Father has no ulterior motivation, for example, to secure further blessings. Ingratitude is perhaps the most common of all human failings. Gratitude, thanksgiving, is what our parents teach us from the earliest days. Gratitude is what Mary and Joseph must have taught Jesus. The wonder of this day, the source of even more gratitude for this Feast of the Nativity, is that the acknowledgment of my own ingratitude or snarkiness or presumption is not an embarrassment hindrance to God's presence. It is the prompting of God's lavish holding me in my imperfection, like a mother who holds a child that does not yet understand that love ultimately is meant to beget more love.

May Advent hope swell to Christmas joy for you and all you love.