

## **Christmas, 2016**

Isaiah 9:1-6/Titus 2:11-14/

Luke 2:1-14

### **HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT**

Horns were honking! Nerves were fraying! and shoppers were NOT rushing home with their treasures because they hadn't found them yet, including me. The smells coming out of the restaurants at Broadway Plaza were tempting at noontime, but I was in a hurry to get to Crate and Barrel. Maybe they had the knife sharpener I should have ordered online weeks ago for a friend. The day before the day before Christmas is no time to be scouring Walnut Creek for last minute gifts even though it's the fate of many of us procrastinators. Running into parishioners and former parishioners at every corner, while enjoyable, didn't expedite the process either. Darn! The green light changed to red and I was stuck there in front of three street musicians. They were probably college students trying to make a few extra bucks during the holidays. I, a lover of music, especially Christmas music, am embarrassed to say -- I couldn't even tell you what song they were playing or what the three instruments were -- maybe a flute, cello and violin.

It made me think of a story I read about Joshua Bell, the world-famous violinist. At the prompting of a news reporter from the Washington Post, he agreed to a little social experiment. Dressed in jeans, a long T-shirt and a Washington Nationals baseball cap, Bell stood, non-descript and unrecognizable, against a wall near a trash can at a subway stop in Washington DC, on a Friday morning during the 8 a.m. rush hour. The experiment was carefully and discretely videotaped by the news reporter. He was interested in finding out how passersby would respond to this world class musician playing some of

the most beautiful music ever written on one of the most valuable violins ever made. In a setting like a subway station at an inconvenient time of morning rush hour, would beauty transcend? Would people appreciate what they were hearing and put a little cash in his open violin case which Bell had primed with some seed money -- a few dollars and some change. Would the context, the perception and the priorities of people in the subway have an impact on how they respond?



You and I live in a world that begs for our response every day -- every moment of every day. It seems that God has created life to give us non-stop previews of beauty and goodness. Nature is the original sacrament; it speaks to us of divine presence and God's encompassing love from the cumulus clouds before a rainstorm to the red haze of the setting sun. Yet, how often we miss the opportunity to stare the God of Creation in the face. All we have to do is stop and look around.

How closely did you look at the photos on the Christmas cards you received in the past couple weeks? I used to think it somewhat arrogant of us to replace the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph on Christmas cards with photos on our own families. But then I realized that those photos ARE pictures of holy families! Don't parents beam with pride over the gift of your children? Aren't you delighted to have your

college student or young adult home with you for the holidays? Aren't you thrilled to have your son or daughter home for Christmas? Isn't that where we find the grace of God most intimately present to us? in the give and take, the struggles and successes, the joys and pains of family life? How often we miss the opportunity to stare the God of love in the face. All we have to do is stop and look and see the people whom God has placed in our lives.

Three days before Joshua Bell appeared at the Metro station, he filled the house at Boston's stately Symphony Hall, where the cheapest seats went for \$100. Two weeks later he played to a standing-room-only crowd at the Strathmore Music Center. The violin he was playing on was his prized Stradivarius valued at over \$3M. At the subway station sixty-three people passed by without paying any attention before a middle-aged man slowed down for a split second and turned his head to notice someone playing. Then, half a minute later, a woman threw a dollar in his case and scooted off. It wasn't until six minutes into the performance that someone actually stood against a wall... and listened. Things never got much better. In three-quarters of an hour that Joshua Bell played, seven people stopped what they were doing to hang around and take in the performance, at least for a minute. Twenty-seven gave money, most on the run – a total of \$32. That leaves 1,070 people who hurried by, oblivious, many only three feet away. Cups of coffee in hand, cellphones at their ears, ID tags from work slapping their bellies as they hurried to their offices. Videotaped on a hidden camera, it's a testimony to the dingy grey rush of our modern world. Like I said, I can't tell you what the three street musicians were playing in Walnut Creek, and I stood right next to them at the traffic signal. I had an agenda that dare not be interrupted, even by the beauty of music.

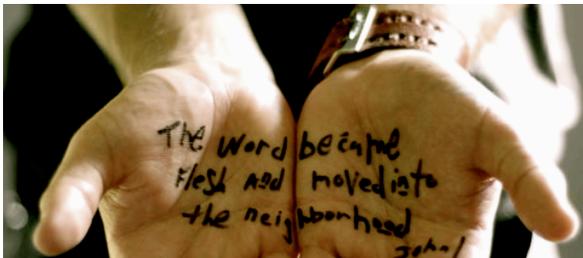
There was a moment of grace for Bell. A woman and her preschooler emerged from the escalator. She walked briskly with her child in hand. On the video you can clearly see the cute little boy in his parka jacket. He kept twisting around to look at the violinist as he was being propelled toward the exit door by his mother. The mom even moved her body between her son and Bell, cutting off her son's line of sight. He was still craning to see as they exited the arcade. Someone once observed that all babies are born with a knowledge of poetry, because the lub-dub of the mother's heart is in iambic pentameter. Then, life slowly chokes the poetry out of us, and perhaps the music too. Meister Eckhart, a medieval spiritual guide, said that each of us has a vintage wine cellar but we seldom drink from it. We have to find the wine cellar in order to drink. And that search takes time, patience, open eyes and ears, and a belief that God is with us and for us. That's the mystery of the Incarnation that we celebrate on this feast of Christmas.



For me, the most significant insight about Joshua Bell's little experiment came from the Brazilian woman who shines shoes at that metro stop. She doesn't like the musicians that play there. She claims they're too loud and she can't hear her customers over the noise, so she calls security to chase them away. She told the reporter who conducted the experiment that she thought Bell was too loud, but that he was pretty good and it was the first time she didn't call the police. She wasn't surprised at all when

she found out he was a famous musician and nobody stopped to listen. “Predictable,” she said. “If something like that happened in Brazil, everyone would stand around to see. Not here. A couple years ago, a homeless guy died right there.” She pointed to a spot at the top of the escalator. “He just lay down there and died. The police came, the ambulance came, and no one even stopped to see or slowed down to look. People walk up the escalator; they look straight ahead. Mind your own business, eyes forward. Everyone is stressed,” she said to the reporter. “Do you know what I mean?”

Yes, I know what you mean, lady; we all do -- only too well. We’re so tuned in that we’ve tuned out anything and anyone that isn’t within our frame of reference, our narrow field of vision. Not only do we miss the beauty before our eyes, but the tragedies of the poor and suffering pass us by just as quickly. In a world plagued by renewed nuclear threat, discrimination, an uncertain political future and daily reports of violence and international terrorism, it’s hard to see those glimpses of grace. Burdened as many are by unemployment, poor health and daily pressures, it’s not easy to move out of our context, change our perception and invert our priorities to recognize this world as God’s creation. Yet Christ, who comes to us this Christmas in Word and Sacrament, in celebration and community, invites us to open our eyes and our hearts to his presence manifest in so many ways. Most significantly, God comes to us disguised as our life. Whoever thought that’s where we’d meet God.



Each year our Christian tradition and Catholic faith bring us together for this special day. Our faith tells us that the soul is deeply united to God, and if we can become conscious of this soul in us, we can see and feel the presence of God that surrounds us all the time. That deep space within will be a place where we can stand to defy all the things that try to tear us down and destroy us when the circumstances of our lives that are not completely where we want them to be. The problem is we are often not in touch with this deep, interconnectedness to the Divine Source. A poet writes: *What is this life if, full of care, we have no time to stop and stare.* You may not have time to come to the manger after Mass and stop and stare. Like me, you probably have an agenda that’s pretty tight and full. But some time tonight or tomorrow, do take a quiet moment or two to ponder the mystery we’re celebrating at Christmas. God is right here in the thick of our day-by-day lives... trying to get messages through our blindness as we move around down here, knee-deep in the fragrant muck and misery and marvel of the world. Welcome within your own heart and home Jesus who is born for us, not only in time, but in spirit... and here... in our hearts, in our very flesh and bones.

*Fr. John Kasper, OSFS*