Dear friends in Christ Jesus,

We call them “bundles of joy.” They bring smiles and tears of joy to relieved mothers finished with labor, to proud papas passing out cigars, and to grandparents, relatives and friends who press up close to the glass in the hospital nursery, excitedly pointing out exactly which one is “theirs.” And as news of the birth is shared, every detail of the “bundle of joy” is noted: length, weight, color and thickness of the hair. People want to know if the baby looks more like Mom or more like Dad. And of course the biggest question of the day will always be, “Is it a boy or a girl?”

This Christmas Eve, Christians around the world are gathering to celebrate God’s Own Bundle of Joy! The best Christmas present our world has ever received! The Baby Jesus born at Bethlehem!

Why is this Child so important? Isaiah tells us, doesn’t he? His prophecy allows us to glimpse into the very heart and mind of the coming Savior! And centuries later, Jesus himself quoted these words when he preached in the Synagogue of his home town of Nazareth. “The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me. . .to comfort all who mourn.”

This Child came to “comfort all who mourn.” He did right away, even from His cradle. Think of the comfort he brought to his Mother Mary! Can you see how her face must have glowed when “she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. . .wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger.” Mary knew how precious this child was. An angel’s visit 9 months earlier and the miraculous conception made it all so clear to her. She knew this precious baby boy was “God my Savior!” She said as much in the beautiful hymn of praise she had composed before the child was ever born! And that Christmas night, when the shepherds came and knelt beside the child’s cradle, we are told that “Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.”

Then there was Joseph. Think of the comfort this bundle of joy brought him! Here was a poor man who had been heart-broken when he first learned that his fiancée Mary was pregnant! Pregnant? Even though she was engaged to him? He knew he wasn’t the father, so Mary must have been unfaithful. That apparent adultery was sufficient grounds for divorce back then, and that’s what a heart-sick Joseph intended to do. Until an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. And the angel told him, “What is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” (Matthew 1:20-21)

Now that first Christmas night, the baby had been born! He was healthy, and he was whole. Count ‘em-he had all his fingers and all of his toes. This precious little boy was perfect in every way. Perfect in every way. Holy and pure in heart, mind and soul. Little Jesus was just beginning a life that would be lived but for one purpose. To save. To save also Joseph from his sins. What a comfort!

Then there were the shepherds. As soon as the heavenly choir finished their birth announcement and departed, the shepherds said, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about. So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.” Shepherds, in that day and age, were pretty much at the bottom of the social ladder. Nobody wanted to hang around shepherds, if for no other reason than they smelled bad. But God’s angels had gone out of their way to invite the shepherds to the very first Christmas Eve Worship service. As those shepherds knelt beside the manger, they found comfort, too. For they knew the angel’s words were true, “Unto you is born this night, in the city of David, a Savior, which is Christ the Lord!” No wonder they left the stable “glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen!”

God’s own Bundle of Joy brought comfort that first Christmas night, and he still brings comfort to us this Christmas night. That comfort is ours because we know what the Child came to do. Isaiah tells us. The Child came “to provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.” Isaiah wants us to know the difference this child will make! The prophet uses picture language the people of his day could easily understand. Why? Because those were dark days in Israel. Isaiah was preaching to a nation that was going to lose everything! They would be dragged from their homes, judged, and exiled into the distant prison of a far-off land. Their spirits would be broken, their hopes crushed, their lives turned into a hell on earth. Many of them may well have started each day with this prayer, “God let me die today. . .Life is not worth living.”

But all that would change because of the Child! Because of the difference he would make. In exchange for the ashes of death, the Child would bring them royal crowns. In exchange for the mourning of their everyday, earthly
lives, the Child would give them the oil of gladness. Back then, olive oil was used for celebrations—like weddings. It was a symbol of prosperity, used in worship, in cooking, in medicine, and also in lamps for light.

So the Child that was to come was going to change everything. He’d make the difference between death and life. As the prophet explains, he will give “a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.” Take off the black, funeral clothes and dry your tears, for Jesus changes everything!

And yet how did the Child make such a difference? If we study the records of that first Christmas Eve, we don’t see the Shepherds leaving the stable with crowns on their heads. Luke doesn’t tell us that Mary and Joseph suddenly became rich after the birth of their baby boy. That they went on a Christmas shopping spree in Jerusalem, buying the fanciest of royal garments, because they had barrel upon barrel of oil stockpiled as their source of wealth for many years to come.

And maybe this evening, some of us also know that being a Christian doesn’t mean all our bills are always paid. It doesn’t mean our bank accounts are flush, or that our retirements are fully funded.

So what kind of difference does the baby Jesus make? The difference between living our lives afraid and alone, and living them knowing we have a gracious Lord who is keeping his promise to be “with us always.” The difference between living in fear and living in the confidence of St. Paul who shouted, “If God is for us, who can stand against us!” The difference of giving up when life is hard, of being consumed with worries when crises come, and instead trusting, “In all things, God works for the good of those who love him.”

What difference does the baby Jesus make? The difference between life and death. The difference between heaven and hell. 33 years after Bethlehem, at Golgotha, Jesus laid down his life because it was the only way to make a difference. The only way to “bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn.” Only through the sacrifice of himself, could Jesus earn forgiveness of sins for you and me.

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This Christmas Eve, in spirit, join the shepherds in the stable. Kneel next to the cradle. Can you see him—the Christchild? By God’s grace, that one is ours. And once we know him by faith, our lives will never be the same again.

Merry Christmas. Amen.