

Homily for Christmas Mass
SFBRHS/St. Joseph's Neier
Rev. Kevin Schmittgens

December 20, 24, 25, 2013

Central Idea: Christmas is a time to let down our defenses and allow the love and grace of God to enter into our lives.

The world was on edge.

This is a true story.

It is December 24, 1955. The United States is the throes of a Cold War with the Soviet Union. The fear of communism and the threat of nuclear annihilation are real, are tangible and are pervasive. The world is indeed on edge.

In a bunker at the Continental Air Defense Command Operations Center in Colorado Springs, Colorado, there is a red phone. When the phone rings it is one of two possibilities: it is either General Earle Partridge, the commander of the Center, or it is the Pentagon. In either case the fact that the phone is ringing is an occasion for deep concern. The red phone only rings if there is a problem, a big, uh, nuclear problem.

And on Christmas Eve, 1955, the red phone, ominously, began ringing.

All of the servicemen in the Command Center held their collective breath. This was not good news. Were those godless Russians really going to attack on the holiest of nights, Christmas Eve? Did fighter planes need to scramble to protect the coasts? Was this it? Was nuclear war about to commence during the holiday season? How ironic!

U.S. Air Force Col. Harry Shoup, the director of operations, rushed to the phone and grabbed it.

"Yes, Sir, this is Colonel Shoup," he growled.

On the other end was an eerie silence.

Again he answered, "Sir, this is Colonel Shoup."

Again, stark silence.

It was now Shoup's turn to become edgy, very, very edgy.

"Sir, can you read me alright?"

The entire command room was still and tense.

Finally, on the other end of the phone came a soft, little voice.

“Is this Santa Claus?”

“Huh?” thought Shoup. Then he spun around to check the men in the room. He thought he was the victim of a practical joke, but *no one was laughing*. The men just looked at him with stony, serious faces.

“Who is this!” Shoup barked.

The little voice on the line begins to cry. “Is this one of Santa’s elves, then?” she asks.

It was at this very moment, that Colonel Harry Shoup of the United States Air Force, makes a fateful decision, a decision that would originate a tradition that is carried down to this very day. Because of his quick thinking, because of his character, because of his soul, there is joy, there is wonder, there is still magical charm in this world. Shoup realized that there was a screw-up somehow, somewhere and decided, in that moment, to simply... just play along.

“Well,” he said, clearing his throat, “Yes, I am Santa. Have you been a good little girl?”

The girl composed herself and said that, indeed, she was, and told Shoup/Santa that she would leave some food out for both him and his reindeer and then recited her list. Shoup thanked her for her hospitality and then told her he had to go, since he had a lot of traveling to do. The little girl then asked: “Santa? How do you get to all those homes in one night?”

Uh, whoops.

Without missing a beat, Shoup with the calm and coolness of a seasoned military man replied: “I am sorry little girl, that is classified information. So if anyone asks you about that, tell them not to ask so many questions or they will be put on the ‘Naughty’ list.”

So how did a little girl get through to one of the most sensitive and top secret phone numbers in the world? Well...it seems that the retailer Sears had a promotional gimmick in the newspaper with a phone number for kids to call so that they could talk personally to Santa Claus. Unfortunately, the ad copy had a little bitty typographical error. The phone number was one digit off. So instead of connecting to a department store with a cheesy Santa impersonator, the kids got through to the High Command of the U.S. Nuclear Defense System. Totally true. You don’t have to look it up on snopes.com. I already did.

In fact, the phone rang all night long. Col. Shoup put some men on the detail. They were to answer the phone and to relay to the callers Santa's current position as they tracked him with radar. Presumably, if *the Pentagon* were to actually call, they were to respond a tad differently.

The Continental Air Defense Command changed its name to the North American Aerospace Defense Command in 1958, now known as NORAD. And, sure enough, every Christmas Eve, NORAD tracks Santa as he makes his way around the world. All thanks to a quick thinking officer whose heart was in the right place.

It is a cute little story; one that is easy to smile at. But I also believe the story of Shoup and Sears ad screw up is a bit of a parable, a parable we would do well to reflect upon in the Year of Our Lord, 2013 and beyond.

Our world is filled with edgy people. Just watch the news or surf the net, and you will notice that we are obsessed with constantly being on the defensive. We anxiously watch the "red phones" of our lives, ready to attack or counter attack, ready to protect ourselves and our interests, no matter the cost, no matter the consequences. Our fingers are nervously poised on the trigger buttons of hostility and resentment waiting for anyone to cross the line, for anyone to invade our territory, for anyone to start an assault on anything we hold near and dear. We may not be at total war, yet, but we are certainly not at peace. And all that posturing, all that antagonism, all that enmity, wearies and drains us. We are balanced, precipitously on the edge, the edge of anger and rage, and it is definitely not a good place to be.

And then comes Christmas. Like a bewildering, unexpected yet astonishing phone call from a little girl, God's grace sneaks its way into the bunkers of our lives, to touch our hearts and transform our attitudes. Suddenly, the useless, senseless Cold Wars of our existence begin to thaw a bit. With this holy season, we are able to divert our energies away from defensive and destructive poses and posturing, and once again learn to build and create and encourage. In this blessed time, we begin to find a common purpose, instead of the sharp and jagged wedges that always seem to separate and divide us into warring camps. Our celebration of birth of the Messiah, like NORAD's radar, helps us once more to track the movement of love and grace as it makes its way through our cold and inhospitable world.

As you celebrate with your families this week, try to remember and hold on to the reason for the season; namely, that our God came down to walk among us, to offer his life, to share his love, to give us grace.

And ultimately to coax us back from the perilous edge of self-destruction.