I want to begin with a disclaimer especially for those home from college (and younger!) for fear that my opening story will seem to be pre-historic..literally!

Before there were hand held devices that live stream movies, or iTablets that connect us worldwide on the Internet, or cell phone IM connectedness …Before “the cloud” and before cell phones were able to be used on planes, there was such a thing as a television set…..not HDMI or HDTV, but a box, originally very large but then smaller, (but nowhere near today’s sizes which can be the side of a Mack truck!) that had black and white, not color reception…and most of the shows were live and believe it or not, they could not be “Tivoed” or taped.

One such show was a quiz show named “You Bet Your Life” and the host was Groucho Marx of the then (in)famous five Marx brothers …who also starred together in movies made, not for TV but that you went to see in theaters.! And so to a story about Groucho Marx.

A priest in Toronto was about to cross the street when he spied Groucho Marx on the other side. He decided to remain and greet the famous star, Groucho, when he came across. As he did so the priest stretched out his hand, shook Groucho’s and said “Mr. Marx, thank very much for bringing such joy into so many people’s lives.” To which Groucho, raising his very full black eyebrows “and thank you, Father for taking the joy out of so many people’s lives!

Whatever can be said of Pope Francis so far in his pontificate… he is a joy-filled person who talks the talk and walks the walk of joy in Christ…and sometimes that joyful news is confounding, paradoxical and yet life changing. It is clear that he is very popular across our world and country, crossing denominational and religious lines, and his visage is almost always of a joy-filled person.
He was named TIME magazine’s “Person of the Year” and his photo is on its mid-December cover. A sketch of Pope Francis also appeared on the cover of the current THE NEW YORKER, as well as being the subject of its lead article.

But far more seriously was the first document to come from the pen of this pope…he himself published it in mid November, called “The post Synodal Exhortation about the New Evangelization”.

The first two words are “the joy of the gospel.” This was a long anticipated document and it was expected that there would be no surprises. WRONG! Not this pope!

I read it as a meditation this Advent… and judge that it is so profound, in depth and challenge that it was my Advent spiritual reading. Why?

Among other things it invites us to go out of ourselves individually and as a church to get our hands dirty in the everyday of life so that the joy of the gospel can be known – through each of us, (as the pope reminds us), not through any level of bureaucracy or Vatican administration.
The only God many people will ever come to know is the God we make known to them. Today we celebrate the fact that God took on human form and flesh…and that from then to now (and until the kingdom comes!) we humans carry the very being of God…God is as close to us in Christ as every breath we breathe…and is with us in every step we take…he is Emmanuel, God with us in joy and, yes in sorrow.

Tonight’s gospel is a familiar one. But we read it every year on this most holy night so that in hearing it we experience what it says. **JOY** and that a **SAVIOR** is born for us **TODAY**.

Let’s take each of those in turn.

**JOY.** This answers the question: “what happens at Christmas?” Again Francis takes the lead. The joy of the Christian is a paradoxical one. It is not produced by the Hallmark card or those inspirational made for TV Christmas, “feel good” shows.

Every time we celebrate the Eucharist – which means Thanksgiving – we hear the words “as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ…” “Joyful hope” is what Advent was all about. The reality of **joy in God** is what Christmas is all about.

“Joyful hope” is a major part of what the **papacy** of Pope Francis is all about.

Not the cheap joy of things or the quick witted smile or smirk that came from a Groucho Marx joke… It is the quiet joy Christians like you and me who tonight once again experiences through this Eucharist that we are not “touched by an angel” but changed into Christ once again through Christ’s human birth among us.

It is the joy that comes from parents who are content that they are doing their best in raising a family, despite cultural pressures to the contrary…and when there are disagreements that they can and will talk them through…

It is the joy of satisfaction that comes from going outside of ourselves at this time of year for those who have less, (and those who have nothing!).

It is the joy of giving **love** and **hope** to others, of reconciling where healing is needed even (or especially when we were not at fault), or caring and honest speech in a world where we **hear far too many words** and really **listen** to so very few.

**SAVIOR.** This answers the question “why” did there have to be a Christmas?

The gospel is clear, we venerate the child born a savior. We use the word “savior” and “redeemer” a lot in our belief system and in the prayers we say. Take tonight:

“Today is born a savior, Christ the Lord” and “our Redeemer’s Nativity.” “**Savior**” is a word that comes from the Latin meaning healing.

“**Redeemer**” is a word that is an economic metaphor…it means to “buy back” what was lost. Christ “buys back” what was lost in sinful Adam.

Why did we need a Savior?

How many of us use Apple products? And what is the Apple logo but in fact an apple with a bite taken out. Tonight is about what was behind the bite…disobedience. (I suspect Steve Jobs never thought that his logo would make it into a Christmas sermon!”) But we all need a savior. And in receiving our Savior, Christ, we can name what we need to be saved from.
• **Fear**? Have you noticed how often in the Christmas gospels the people are told not to be afraid? Why? Because we are afraid. Among other things, we are afraid of…
  - economic impoverishment from a lack of jobs…
  - or of ill health as we pass from the productive years to what is called “the third age…” which in popular parlance is “you are looking wonderful.”
  - From feeling like it is impossible to work through difficult relationships. But when we do… we are the stronger for those **conversations** (which are hopefully not **confrontations**).
  - From the fear of rejection by others (which is human nature), rather than being filled with God’s life and love which makes us uniquely who we are and the person God loves into being and becoming.

Again …Pope Francis takes the lead…we are not to fear God or the Church at all…we are to allow God to embrace us and gently carry us in his arms and over his shoulders…to “save” and “redeem” us.

We are saved from judging our worth by what we possess and being fearful of others’ judgments, rather than being possessed by God through his Son, our Savior.

**TODAY** – This is the answer to the question when does Christmas happen? We live in a culture of anticipation…the vigil of Christmas began on the vigil of Black Friday. Christmas 2013 is different from every Christmas we ever celebrated before… and different from any that we will celebrate in the future.

Why? TODAY, in this day and age, in this broken world God comes again to save and redeem, to heal and reconcile. Sometimes we sing Christmas music that speak of what we wish to be.
  - Silent night..all is calm, all is bright.
  - Oh little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie

Not for the soldier in Afghanistan…or the warring parties in Bethlehem where the Prince of Peace was born and tonight is born anew……or the person who has tried his or her best but is depressed and looks from a cloud of darkness to any point of light, not to mention a thousand of them…one flickering light at the end of the tunnel is high noon for them… and us.

The “what” of Christmas is JOY.

The “why” of Christmas is that we needed a SAVIOR.

The “when” of Christmas is TODAY (not back in history!)

When any of us use our APPLE devices tonight or tomorrow just remember that the sin of disobedience…the bite out of the apple…has been overcome and literally undone in the obedience of Christ.

And that obedience leads us to JOY…with Pope Francis at our lead..the joy of the gospel is worth it all.

The name of Groucho Marx’s show was “You Bet Your Life.” In fact it is Christ who came to give his life as our ransom and redemption..to buy us back..and to set us right with God.

That is what we celebrate tonight, this Christmas 2013… news of great JOY, that TODAY a SAVIOR is born among and for us.

….And despite the quip of Mr. Marx on that street corner in Canada many years ago, no one (not even a priest?) can ever take that JOY out of our lives!