

Christmas Eve

My father learned to play baseball when he was a kid. I have a photo of him as an adult standing in front of his childhood home in New Orleans on the grass where his father taught him to throw and catch a ball. Dad played catcher for a local team. He had never seen professional baseball until he took my mother to a game on their honeymoon. After four of us were born, Dad's company transferred him from New Orleans to Kansas City in 1954. The next year the Philadelphia Athletics also moved to Kansas City. We lived at 57th and Woodland, walking distance to St. Therese Little Flower Church and School, and a 12-minute drive to Municipal Stadium. The Athletics were a terrible baseball team. They played here for 13 years and had a losing season every year. In 1966 when I was 13 years old the A's had their best season. They won 74 games and lost 86.

The Royals, of course, are a different story. Since they started here in 1969, they have brought the World Series to Kansas City four times. In 1980, I had been a priest for less than two years when a parishioner gave me tickets to Game 5. We lost. In 1985 when the Royals went back to the World Series, I was completing my studies at the University of Sant' Anselmo in Rome. We had no internet, no email, and not even a fax machine. We could receive phone calls from the US, but they were expensive. The games took place at night in Kansas City, which is early morning in Rome. I asked my father to call me after every World Series game with the score. This was an expensive request, but my father loved his son, and he loved baseball. So each morning that week when I woke up in Rome, the phone rang in my room, and Dad gave me the score of the game that had just ended back at home. For Game 7, Dad used a handheld tape recorder to preserve the radio call of the final out, and he played it back to me long distance, across the ocean, so that I could hear the cheers of Kansas City fans seven time zones away.

My father died 13 years ago, but I'm sure he was smiling in heaven when the Royals won it all again this year. A World Series championship can do wonders for a team, a city, a family, and individual fans. When your team is a champion, you feel as though you are a champion. Kansas Citians felt as though we each had something to brag about, as if we had each personally contributed to the victories.

We feel happy at Christmas for a similar reason. We had nothing to do with the birth of Jesus in his manger at Bethlehem long ago, but we each feel as if his birth happened to our family. The joy of Joseph and Mary is our joy too.

St. Paul writes to Titus, "The grace of God has appeared, saving all." Paul is referring to the coming of Jesus Christ. His birth was a moment of grace, and he came to save all - not just you and me, but everyone. We all have moments when we need grace. We don't know the right words to say or the right thing to do. We can't pass a test or hold down a job. We can't make the right impression on the people we love the most. We all need grace. But here's the message of Christmas: We all have grace. The grace of God has appeared, and it has saved every one of us. Royals fans all felt joy after the World Series, but every one of us owns a deeper joy remembering the birth of Jesus. He was just the right gift at just the right time. Whenever we feel lost, diminished, battered, or lonely, he comes to us as what we need. He comes to us as God's own grace.