

On Monday I sat down at the desk to start working on this homily for you, my heart filled with the joy of Christmas, my mind brimming with messages of peace and happiness, my spirit soaring with the carols and decorations of the season. I opened up my laptop to organize my thoughts, plunged my finger onto the start button, and - nothing. Absolutely nothing happened. My computer died. A compassionate technician gave this diagnosis over the phone: "It's your motherboard." And with those three words, I knew it was not going to be a very merry Christmas this year.

I was all set to tell you that the birth of Jesus brings more joy than any sorrow you could be holding in your heart. Your grades are low at school? Your best friend wrecked your car? You're home for the holidays, but so far you'd really rather be somewhere else? Someone you love is in harm's way. There's an empty seat at the Christmas table this year. Whatever your sorrow, the joy of this day should outweigh it like a fat kid on the far end of a teeter-totter. Christmas overcomes any sorrow except the death of my motherboard, which is as disastrous as life can get.

Seriously, life can be pretty hard. If you're about to give birth, you don't want to face what Mary did: riding a mule all day to a place where your husband never made a hotel reservation. If you're living in exile from your homeland, you want to believe a prophet named Isaiah that light has shone onto your darkness, that the rod of your taskmaster has been smashed, and that you now have joy greater than people have at the harvest, or when they divide up the spoils of war, or when they finally win the NCAA Division II title football championship game on the fifth attempt - everybody wants that kind of joy. And Christmas is supposed to deliver it.

It does. No, we don't always get what we want: the Xbox 360, the iCarly jeans, or the Hannah Montana Malibu beach house. We don't always reach our goals. We don't always get the breaks. We don't always obtain what we foolishly think will make us happy. Christmas is a kind of reality check. It's God's way of saying, "Look, I've already given you something else. I've already expressed my care for you in the most extraordinary way. I became like you to live like you and suffer like you, so you would know I understand you." Really, being understood is the greatest gift of all.

God sent Jesus into the world with two gifts for us: forgiveness and everlasting life. Jesus understood what we need most. We may not get for Christmas this year exactly what we want; I'm still hoping a motherboard will appear under my tree, along with an elf to install it. But that's not why Jesus came to us. We focus too much on our unanswered mediocre prayers and ignore the incredible yes we received to a request we never even made. God has given us a Savior, a child who rescues us from sin and saves us from death. If we get that message straight, no matter what sorrows we have, Christmas will always be merry.