

Every few months I get an email that tells me the number of views I've had on the internet. I get the emails each time I amass another half-million views. To date I'm up to over 3.8 million views on the world wide web.

But most of these views have nothing to do with church. Yes, in the past year and a half we've been broadcasting our services on the internet. I also post videos and classes on the web. But at most, all of these postings from me as a priest probably account for around 10,000 to 15,000 hits. A respectable number, but nowhere near 3.8 million.

So what accounts for my millions of hits? Google Maps. Over the years I've submitted additions to Google Maps, things that weren't on the map before. About  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a million hits are for a number of hiking trail trailheads I've added in the Sacramento Mountains around Cloudcroft NM.

But that still leaves 3 million hits unaccounted for. What have millions of people been interested in? Rest areas. A number of years ago I added two rest areas that weren't on Google Maps, one on Interstate 17 north of Phoenix, and one on I-40 east of Albuquerque. These generate huge numbers of views.

So all of the spiritual content I've offered on the internet totals 10s of thousands of hit. The hiking trails that given people a chance to get out and experience God's creation have gotten 100s of thousands of hits. But bathrooms and places to rest while on the road: that's garnered millions of hits. It's the most basic of human needs that have topped this list.

In a way, these modern highway rest areas have much in common with the Christmas Gospel we hear every year from the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Luke.

Modern rest areas are not very glamorous. They only take care of basic human needs.

There's no gourmet food in a rest area. At best if you're at a big rest area back east, there might be a fast-food joint. But out west, the best you can usually hope for is to find a working vending machine.

You often encounter interesting odors in the restroom, or the smell of diesel fumes or exhaust out in the parking area. And you rub shoulders with fellow travelers who represent a rather complete cross-section of American society.

Likewise, the description of Jesus' birth is not glamorous. A family seeking shelter amongst a crowd of fellow travelers. A borrowed manger, an animal trough with food for donkeys and cattle. A feeding trough is not a very glamorous cradle for the only begotten Son of God. And, of course, a manger presupposes the presence of livestock. Thus stables come with their own odors, the smells of animals and manure.

But on that first Christmas night more than 2,025 years ago, the stable sufficed. It provided a place of shelter, a place with a little bit of privacy, a place to keep the new baby safe

and warm. The stable wasn't fancy, it wasn't glamorous. But it took care of some basic human needs.

And not only did the stable take care of some basic human needs for Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus. It would also provide for an even deeper basic need that we all have, the need for love.

63 years ago, in a now famous psychological experiment, Dr. Harry Harlow would place tiny baby rhesus monkeys in the presence of two surrogate mother dolls. One surrogate mother was made largely of wire mesh, but she had a baby bottle attached filled with milk. The other surrogate mother provided no food. But she was covered in soft terrycloth. It turned out the monkeys would cling to the soft mother doll, and only venture to the other surrogate mother when they were hungry. But once they were fed, the baby monkeys would return to the soft terrycloth mother.

These experiments, plus some others, pointed to a deep need that these little primates had for comfort and love and contact and affection. And at a deep level, we all share those same needs.

Yes, we have basic needs for food and shelter. But we also have deep needs for affection and love and relationship.

And to show the depths of his love for us, on this night we remember how God entered the world to live with us, as one of us. Jesus is the supreme sign and token of the depths of God's love for us.

God loved us enough to be born into our midst, even in the midst of very humble circumstances. He was born in the first century equivalent of a rest area. He came into this world in the midst of very earthy sights and smells. And he did so to show the depths of God's love for us.

And later that same baby would grow up and teach about God's love. He would give tangible and miraculous demonstrations about how God longs to care for us and heal us.

And later, that same baby would suffer an agonizing death on a cross, so that we might know the enormous depths of God's love. It turned out to be a love which conquers death itself. The cross provides a way for us to live and bask in God's love forever.

798 years ago tonight, there was a rather famous man who was thinking about these things. He was reflecting on the nature and the strength of God's tremendous and total love for us. And he wanted to try to convey that viscerally to the people around him. So he invented something that Christians have been using every Christmas ever since.

798 years ago tonight, St. Francis of Assisi invented the first creche, the first nativity scene, the first manger scene.

But it wasn't a small model like we have. It was life-size. And for this first nativity scene, St. Francis didn't use human figures. He invited the local people to come out on Christmas eve to a cave-stable in the hills. And there they saw a life-size manger. It was very simple. It was just an empty manger. And St. Francis had brought in a couple of animals, an ox, and a donkey. And there, in that setting in the Italian countryside, they all celebrated Christmas Eve communion together.

When the time came for the Gospel reading, St. Francis, who was a deacon, read the same Gospel story that we just heard from the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Luke.

And then St. Francis preached a Christmas Eve sermon. He stood by the empty manger and asked people to contemplate the depths of God's love for them, as exemplified by the humble circumstances of Jesus birth.

And then in his sermon, St. Francis talked about taking up the Christ child and holding him close. And as he did so, he pantomimed reaching into the empty manger, and he pantomimed holding a baby in his arms. And there were a number of reports that night that people experienced something special during Francis's sermon.

It may have been an experience in their imaginations. Or it may have been a genuine spiritual vision. But there are numerous reports that night that people could actually perceive the infant Christ child being held in St. Francis's arms. Somehow, they had a vivid experience of God's presence in their midst on that Christmas Eve.

After the sermon and the prayers, they set a flat surface on top of the manger. And they celebrated communion right there. In that place where they commemorated God coming into the world in the infant Jesus, they then shared the sacred meal Jesus commanded his followers to share. They partook of that meal that is God's continuing sign of Jesus' presence in our midst.

Years ago, when I was a young seminarian and then priest, we had infant children. And I would marvel at the joy of holding them in my arms. At one level it was just a wonderful warm tactile feeling, one mammal holding another mammal in his arms. But there was also the joy of the relationship I had with them. Father to son. Father to daughter.

But as I would hold them and rock them, I often experienced something else as well. I experienced the feeling that while I was holding my children in my arms, God was also holding me in his arms. And I somehow had a visceral and powerful sense that God's love for me far exceeded the depths of love I had for my children. And I would often bask in the warm glow of God's love.

This Christmas Eve, open your arms to the Christ child. Hold him close. Come to his table and reach out your hands. Take the visible sign of his continuing presence into yourselves through the sacrament of Holy Communion. Marvel at the depths of his love for you.

And remember that God embraces you. God came into this world in humble circumstances in order to have a relationship with you.

God wants to enfold you in his arms.

Bask in the warmth of his love. Rest in his embrace.