Good morning! Today is the 12th day of Christmas. Over time this day marked for many, the end of Christmas celebrations; and, the story of the three kings or wisemen also marked the opening of Christ’s message to the whole world. The western Church in Rome has celebrated the Christmas feast since the middle of the fourth century, and the celebration of Epiphany dates from later in that same century. Easter and Christmas and Epiphany are the three oldest feasts of the Christian church.

I found an interesting explanation of the song we know as “The Twelve Days of Christmas”; turns out it originated in 16th century England. It may sometimes seem to us like a nonsense song, but the song is really an example from a time when teachers of the Christian faith used code language to teach people to help them remember what they learned about the faith—because if they were caught speaking directly about the faith, they were threatened with being drawn and quartered by those in power. So, here is what the song referred to in their symbolic teaching:

--Day 1 stood for Christ’s birth; Day 2 stood for the Old and New Testaments; Day 3- faith, hope, and charity; Day 4-the gospels; Day 5 – the first five books of the Old Testament, the Pentateuch; Day 6 – the six days of creation in Genesis; Day 7 –the gifts of the Holy Spirit; Day 8 –the eight Beatitudes; Day 9- the fruits of the Holy Spirit; Day 10 – the Commandments; Day 11 – the Apostles who remained after Judas left; and Day 12 – the points of doctrine listed in the Apostles Creed. Counting the days this was what we call today a mnemonic device, a way for a predominantly rural culture to review their religious teachings.

We may ask ourselves on this 12th Day of Christmas, what we hope to have gained as we finish our celebrations of this Christmastime together: we’ve enjoyed the images and songs of the season; we’ve renewed memories; are glad to be moving on from the longest and darkest nights of the year; and, most of all, the astounding gift of Jesus as Incarnate God, celebrated in myriad songs and art pieces, during a time when just about everything can take on special meaning.

Acknowledging the ongoing gifts of God’s life in us—starting with the gift of life itself, and moving on to the life of faith, and the richness of grace. God’s covenant with the chosen
people…and God’s covenant with each one of us…(Abraham Heschel describes “God in search of humanity”)

Karl Rahner in The Great Church Year, --quoted in the December issue of Give Us This Day reminded us that Advent and Christmas summon us to look to acknowledge the victory of God’s love for the world. To acknowledge that we are people of expectation and hope, and that ultimately our faith is in the eternal future of God.

Also, in our time, we have the experience of seeing the image of the earth from space as a blue marble pictured in its totality, in a picture taken by astronauts as they circled our earth in space. And this is the same earth our Pope Francis calls us to think of as our common home. And astronauts and scientists also show us evidence of the rapidly expanding universe in which the blue marble sits. Now for us all of this is the setting for our life. Into this setting Jesus came to dwell with us and teach us how to live. How can we take that in?

In 1941, the early days of World War II in England, the poet W H Auden wrote a book length poem, called “For the Time Being” known also as “A Christmas Oratorio.” It has grown more popular as years go by. In it, he tells the stories of Mary and Joseph and Jesus. For today, though, I want to use his stories of the wisemen and the shepherds. Their long journey gives the wisemen time to miss their homes and dogs and cigars, and power, time to ponder their lives and they realize and explain that they are following the star to learn to be truthful, to learn to be more living,…to be more loving, to be human. And they meet the shepherds at the manger: the shepherds say that they too have walked hundreds of miles-- though just back and forth from their homes to their work every day—but they come to learn their own dignity as individuals here at the manger.

For some years it was customary for radio station WFMT some time during the post-Christmas time to air the Epilogue, the very end part of Auden’s poem, For the Time Being. And I’d like to read just a few excerpts from that now, on this 12th day of Christmas:

Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes—
Some have got broken---and carrying them up to the attic,
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,
And the children got ready for school. There are enough
Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week---
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,
Stayed up so late, attempted—quite unsuccessfully—
To love all of our relatives, and in general
Grossly overestimated our powers. Once again
As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable Possibility.

He goes on, The Christmas Feast is already a fading memory…
…For the Time being, here we all are,
Back in the moderate Aristotelian city
Of darning and the Eight-Fifteen, where Euclid’s geometry
And Newton’s mechanics would account for our experience…
…and again ……To those who have seen
The Child, however dimly, however incredulously,
The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all ..

He is the Way.
Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;
You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.
Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;
You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.

He is the Life.
Love him in the World of the Flesh;
And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.

A Scientist’s quote: Humanity is the way the universe reflects on itself.

So now, May the many graces of this Christmas time renew and refresh us as we return to Ordinary Time.