

# HOUSEHOLD LEADER SIMBANG GABI SUPPLEMENT

## CHRISTMAS 2008

# *Jesus our Hope, our Only Hope*

So this is Christmas.

You've heard the song haven't you? "So this is Christmas and what have you done? Another year over; a new one just begun. Let's hope it's a good one with plenty of cheer."

So this is Christmas. Have you ever said that with more resignation than excitement? Have you ever said it with more disappointment than joy? "So this is Christmas?"

Somewhere in a family gathering there will be a moment when hearts are torn because the place at the table is empty where a precious loved one had once been. Cherished traditions will be robbed of their joy. Somewhere a soldier patrols the streets of a shattered city. Celebration is the farthest thing from his mind. Survival is his all-consuming thought. So this is Christmas.

A hungry child shivers in the cold, waiting for a soup kitchen to serve Christmas dinner, the annual holiday reprieve from life as usual. For a moment, warmth and food will intoxicate his senses. Tomorrow, it's back to the trashcans and cardboard shelters, back to hunger and homelessness. So this is Christmas.

Now how do we pay for everything? We charged and borrowed to buy Christmas, only to receive a termination notice two days before the holiday? Where do we find a new job? Do cancer and caroling go hand in hand? How does a broken body sing, "Tis the season to be jolly?" Fire, earthquake, tidal wave, flood, drought, blizzard, accident; the timing of tragedy is never kind. Death catches humanity unaware. Injuries and inconveniences change schedules, alter lives. So this is Christmas.

A decree sends families scurrying back to their ancestral cities to register. The families who go back to their ancestral homes to register so they can pay taxes are an oppressed people, who live with cruel taskmasters and know the bitterness of Roman rule. So this is Christmas.

Day by day, week after week, year upon year, decade following decade, century fading into century; for 400 years there has been no voice of a prophet. The heavens have been silent; no word of the Lord, no

new revelation from God, and no promised Messiah. The people have prayed, "Deliver us! Deliver us, O Lord!" There has been no deliverance. So this is Christmas.

A poor peasant couple takes shelter in a stable among the livestock of the household. There the woman labors. She pants and groans. Sometimes sharp cries escape her lips with the intensity of her contractions. The man waits anxious and dutiful, watching, praying, doing all he can do to help the midwife and comfort his wife. A little, rough-hewn trough used to feed the donkey just a few hours ago, now stands filled with moldy, dusty hay, ready to receive a child. This is Christmas?

Depressing, huh? Our world, the biblical world, the human world; it is a broken place. The reality we experience day after day doesn't change when we wake up on Christmas morning. The celebration of Christmas rarely heals any wounds or fixes any of the problems we have lived into this day or will carry with us out of it into our tomorrows.

We call this the season of hope, and joy, and love. What do we mean when we use those adjectives? Do we use Christmas as an escape from the harshness of living, like some euphoric cultural drug that titillates our dulled senses into believing in peace and goodwill despite all the evidence to the contrary? How is there hope, real hope, life-changing hope, world-arranging hope, when Christmas comes and goes year after year leaving nothing more than a sweet after-taste in our mouths, so that we can't wait until it rolls around again.

Thankfully the Scriptures aren't fantasy or wishful thinking. The hope given according to the biblical revelation comes to us at night. There is something realistic about the darkness of the night. We sing, "It came upon a midnight clear," but it wasn't a midnight clear. It was a dark night that represented a cold, hard, broken, sometimes lonely, sometimes cruel world. The kind of world you and I live in. Into that world where peo-

*The Advent season is one of hope, but contrary to popular notions, it does not begin there. The season begins with hopelessness.*

*This is the context in which the people of God are truly ready to hear a message of grace and new beginnings. When all other options are closed, when we have exhausted our personal resources, and when we have found all our idols wanting, we are ready to receive the newness only the Lord can create. We are ready to receive Jesus as our hope.*

*May the good and gracious Lord favor you with a joyous Advent and very Merry Christmas!*



**Tue, Dec 16**

*Zephaniah 3:1-2,9-13; Ps 34:2-3,6-7,17-19,23; Mt 21:28-32*

Through the prophet Zephaniah, God promised to eradicate shame and arrogance alike. At first blush, pride and shame seem like total opposites. The proud person trumpets his good qualities (or his power, wealth, or privileges), while the guilt-ridden person is painfully aware of his sins and shortcomings. However, on closer examination, both kinds of people are making the same mistake:

They are relying on themselves rather than casting themselves on the mercy of God. This may be more obvious when we consider the prideful person who is so good he thinks he doesn't really need God. He will plan his own life, thank you, and of course God must have the good sense to agree with his plans. He has the resources to take care of his own needs, and he doesn't mind being generous to others as long as his generosity earns him respect and recognition. Once in a while, though, he catches a glimpse of a greater reality: The world doesn't revolve around him! He's not in control. If he tries to maintain that fiction, he sets himself up for bitter disappointment. The person who focuses on his own sinfulness has also cut himself off from our merciful Father. And he is thus at a great loss. Whether we are more tempted toward pride or shame, we all need to stop relying on ourselves. God longs for us to become "a people humble and lowly, who shall take refuge in the name of the Lord" (Zephaniah 3:12). He wants to fill us with his forgiving, life-changing love. So praise God that you are not in control! Instead, cast yourself on his mercy so that his power becomes your power and his love can soften your pride and strengthen your resolve to follow him.

**"O Lord, I renounce both pride and discouragement. I rejoice because you have turned away these enemies of mine. Let me feel you renewing me in your love!"**

**Wed, Dec 17**

*Genesis 49:2,8-10; Psalm 72:1-4,7-8,17; Matthew 1:1-17*

"Lift up your hearts. *We lift them up to the Lord.* Let us give thanks to the Lord, our God. *It is right to give him thanks and praise.*" So goes the dialogue that begins every Liturgy of the Eucharist. Day after day, week after week, we are called to affirm how "right" it is to honor and worship the Lord our God. Especially as we are preparing for Christmas, it is a good idea to do a little self-examination to test the depth of our own worship of the One whom we are called to adore. Scripture gives numerous examples of those who paid homage to the child Jesus. The Magi followed his star to Bethlehem, where they prostrated themselves before this little boy to do him homage.

When Joseph and Mary took Jesus to the Temple for his circumcision, Simeon took the child in his arms and blessed him. At the same time, Anna, a prophetess, "gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:38). These are not examples of routine encounters with Jesus.

These are people who were filled with the Spirit and who honored the Lord out of the depths of their hearts. All were moved in their hearts to bow down and pay homage to the Christ child. Worship involves being moved in your heart to demonstrate your reverence and gratitude for who Jesus is and for all that he has done for you through his birth, death, and resurrection. Savor those times you have experienced his love, compassion, and grace. Try to recall these moments of grace every day until Christmas, and take be amazed of what God does in you in response.

**"Come, Holy Spirit, and give me a heart so filled with love for Jesus that I will want nothing more than to praise and honor him all my life."**

**Thu, Dec 18**

*Jeremiah 23:5-8; Psalm 72:1-2,12-13,18-19; Mt 1:18-25*

We all dream at night, though many of us tend to forget our dreams as soon as we wake up. But have you ever had a dream that stayed with you for a long time—possibly for years? When he was nine years old, John

Bosco had one of these dreams—and it led him to a ministry to poor and neglected boys that transformed the city of Turin, Italy, and launched an international order of priests. Bosco

continued to have prophetic dreams throughout his life, prompting Pope Pius IX to insist that he write them down to inspire and encourage others. As we see in today's Gospel, Joseph also felt God directing him through dreams. We don't know exactly what his dream was like.

Perhaps he was already wavering toward accepting Mary, and God just gave him a reassuring sense that things would work out. Perhaps he saw a bright light, or heard an angelic choir or an audible voice. It really doesn't matter. Scripture tells us that God intervened while Joseph slept, and that should be good enough for us.

Rather than assuming that only "special" people have dreams like this, we should consider the possibility that God may want to speak to us this way as well. We can probably dismiss it. Dreams can lead us astray if we don't discern them (Sirach 34:7), but like anything else God has created, they can also help us. If you've had a memorable dream recently, what is it telling you? For instance, if you dream about a past hurt that needs forgiving, or an old friend with whom you might want to reconnect, don't dismiss it. The Holy Spirit may be prompting you to do something that can change your life or profoundly bless someone else.

**"Father, how blessed I am that you guide me through this turbulent world. Make me hear your voice and follow you alone."**

**Fri, Dec 19**

*Judges 13:2-7,24-25; Psalm 71:3-6,16-17; Luke 1:5-25*

How shall I know this? (Luke 1:18) Look at Zechariah's reaction to the angel. His question sounds just like Mary's question a few verses later (Luke 1:34).

But there's a big difference. When Mary asks, "How can this be?" she believes the angel, where Zechariah doesn't. And for his disbelief, Zechariah is struck dumb for nine months.

We may feel Zechariah was treated unfairly. But we should remember that Mary questioned the angel in trust, whereas

Zechariah seems to have doubted and disbelieved the angel's message. We should also remember that these nine months for Zechariah were a season of grace from the Lord—a time for him to reflect in quiet prayer on all of God's promises. And we can tell from

his marvelous prayer at his son's birth that this time did not go to waste. Zechariah was a changed man! Our goal, of course, is to have the faith of Mary. Our disbelief may have cost something as well—

perhaps a missed opportunity to share the gospel or a lost chance to reach out to a hurting neighbor. If you slip up, don't condemn yourself. After all,

God isn't angry with you. He may be disappointed, but he never gives up hope. Just as he continued to work with Zechariah, gently teaching him his ways and molding his heart, he will work with you. He may send you right back out there to try again, or he may ask you to take some time to reflect and change an attitude that is keeping you down. Whatever God is doing in your life right now,

trust in him. He really does want to heal you, restore you, and fill you to overflowing with his love. **"Lord, let me trust**

**you and fill me with your Spirit, and equip me to proclaim what you have spoken in the silence of my heart!"**

**Sat, Dec 20**

*Isaiah 7:10-14; Psalm 24:1-6;  
Luke 1:26-38*

The prophet Isaiah had invited King Ahaz to ask anything of God, but he turned it down! The truth is he was shaking in his boots—or sandals. Two formidable nations, Syria and Ephraim, had joined forces to threaten Jerusalem, and Ahaz couldn't see how he or his kingdom would survive.

So when Isaiah prophesied that Jerusalem's enemies would fail and, not only that, be destroyed, Ahaz wavered. It just seemed too illogical. In an attempt to bolster his faith, Isaiah even offered a sign from the Lord. But Ahaz declined, hiding behind an appearance of humility and deference.

What happens next teaches us a lot about God. Did he strike Ahaz down in anger or frustration? Did he relent in his promise to protect Jerusalem? No! Isaiah had offered a sign “deep as the nether world, or high as the sky” (Isaiah 7:11), and God went beyond these parameters and promised the impossible: A virgin would conceive and bear a son (7:14). It was a completely unexpected and miraculous sign that would signal salvation and eternal liberation from their enemies. You may be facing some difficulties today. Maybe a child of yours is in trouble; you might have lost a close friend or be out of work; you or a loved one may have a terminal illness. What stands against you may seem formidable, and you may not know how to get through it. But don't hesitate to ask God to intervene! He wants to show you that he is with you, walking beside you in your struggles. Will your sign be exactly what you expect? Maybe.

God's ways are mysterious sometimes, but you can always trust that his answer will lift you up and meet your deepest needs.

**“Heavenly Father, I ask you for a sign today. Show me that you are with me, even as I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Let me rely on you as the One who provides for my deepest longings!**

**Sun, Dec 21**

*2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8 12,14,16;  
Psalm 89:25,27,29; Romans  
16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38*

It was David's greatest desire to build a house where God would dwell in glory. Imagine his surprise when God denied his request but promised instead to build a house for David—a royal dynasty that would never end. What a reversal! Like David, we often think that human hands can build a house for God. We think that if we spend enough time accomplishing tasks in our churches, meeting spiritual goals, or doing enough charitable works, we can establish his kingdom. We tend to forget that the Christian life has just as much to do with humbly receiving unmerited grace from a powerful and generous God. We tend to forget God's greatest desire—to build his personality, his priorities, and his passions within us.

There is a wonderful story about Vietnamese cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan who, while still a young bishop, was arrested and imprisoned by his government. Van Thuan was so devastated at not being able to complete his projects. Then one night he heard a voice saying, “Why do you torment yourself? Everything you have done and desire to continue doing ... are God's works, but they are not God.”

Overnight Van Thuan's whole way of thinking changed. He found also a new peace and strength that empowered him to surmount moments in prison that were almost unbearable. In his book, *Testimony of Hope*, Cardinal Van Thuan referred to Mary as a prime example of choosing God and not the works of God. “She abandoned her projects without fully understanding the mystery that was being accomplished in her body and destiny.”

By her fiat, Mary allowed God to build within her a house for Jesus. **“Lord, may we follow Mary's example and so you can build your house within and among us.”**

**Mon, Dec 22**

*1 Samuel 1:24-28; (Psalm) 1  
Samuel 2:1,4-8; Luke 1:46-56*

Long before Hannah left her child Samuel with Eli the priest, she dedicated him to the Lord. Knowing God as a good and loving Father allowed her to do this without hesitation or regret. Surely there were moments when she second-guessed her decision. But deep in her heart, Hannah knew that she could trust in God's care and guidance. It is unlikely that any of us will feel moved to drop our kids off at the local church to be raised by our priest. However, we do need to follow Hannah's example and dedicate them to the Lord and let God help us raise them. But there is also the more general call to create homes marked by faithfulness, tenderness, forgiveness, love, and self-sacrifice. There is the need to foster relationships with our children that are marked by encouragement, mutual respect, intimacy, and a sense of ambition and purpose. And then we also have to take advantage of teachable moments that make the gospel relevant to their lives. We do need to take responsibility for our children, but we shouldn't forget the grace of God! We all have dreams and plans for our kids, and it's only natural to push hard to make all these dreams come true. But we have to make sure that we are putting them in God's hands, just as Hannah did, and that we are letting the Lord do some of the work. Jesus has a perfect plan for each of our children, and he will help us every step of the way. What more can we ask?

**“Father, we pray for all those children who have no homes or homes with little tenderness and affection. Lord, bridge the gap between the love they deserve and the love they receive. May they know you as their true Father.”**

**Tue, Dec 23**

*Malachi 3:1-4,23-24; Psalm  
25:4-5,8-10,14; Luke 1:57-66*

Sometimes my ways lead me nowhere, and I feel stuck, trapped, at a loss, and completely without answers. And sometimes, Father, they lead me in a circle, right back to the beginning, no closer to you, no different from before. Oh, make me to know your ways! Father, teach me your paths! Your paths are trustworthy. I don't have to fear where they will lead, for I know they lead to you, the author of my life. I won't slip on them, for they are straight and level. I believe, Father, even though I can't always see. Your paths lead me in the way of peace, and when I walk on them, I find rest from anxiety and fear, from fruitless labor and grinding drudgery. Yes, there is life on your paths, and you fill me with joy in your presence! Guide me in your truth, and teach me. Teach me what is true, what will endure to eternity, what is of you. Teach me, so that I can walk with you, even when the way is beyond my understanding. O Father, I want your ways, not my own! Guide me, because sometimes I don't see so well, and I am often unsure. But you are all-knowing, and what is unfamiliar to me is plain and well known to you. You are wise, and your ways are wisdom. You don't judge, as I sometimes do. Instead, you show me your way, the way of love. You are love—kind, merciful, and faithful. You are almighty, all-powerful, and above all things, yet you reach down and gently touch the secret corners of my heart. You teach everyone who is willing to learn. Even when your guidance is unfamiliar or uncomfortable, I can stand secure because I know you are good and faithful.

**“O Lord, you never change, you never grow weary, you never turn away from me. Yes, you love me and delight in me, for you are my friend!”**

**Wed, Dec. 24**

*2 Samuel 7:1-5,8-12,14,16; Ps 89:2-5,27,29; Luke 1:67-79*

I will give you rest from all your enemies. (2 Samuel 7:11) When

God promised to “establish a house” for David, chances are that David and his descendants were thinking in terms of a military leader who would keep the kingship of Israel in the family line—a dynasty, in other words. This “son of David” to succeed him would be like

David himself: a mighty warrior, a godly man vanquishing all of Israel’s military and political foes. He would bring freedom through the use of conquest and power. As we stand on the brink of Christmas, with the manger before us, we can tell that this is not all that God intended. In fact, Zechariah’s prophecy in today’s Gospel reading touches on the deeper issues of freedom that God promised to the house of David. It was not only freedom from external enemies; it was the freedom to worship fearlessly, the freedom to stand before God holy and righteous.

Jesus, the ultimate Son of David, came to bring us this freedom by defeating the foes within us—sin and death. Far from giving us simply an external peace characterized by a lack of conflict, he came to give us the deeper and more substantial peace that comes as our internal struggles are calmed and the effects of sin are healed. Jesus invites us to leave our sin and fears behind, and—miracle of miracles!—he does it by taking all of these obstacles upon himself and putting them to death by his cross. On this holy night, let’s ask Jesus to bring us into his freedom. Let’s ask him to defeat everything in us that is opposed to him. Let’s rejoice in his promise of freedom and rest from our enemies—the greatest

Christmas gift we could ever receive! **“Lord Jesus, you are the true Son of David. Come this night, and give us your freedom and the responsibility to bear it properly!”**

← P1 ple weep and are hurting and broken there was a cry.

It was a cry of a fragile little baby breaking upon history’s scene. Strips of cloth are wrapped around his tiny body. His mother nuzzles him close for warmth and nourishment. Does the wonder of the picture still amaze you, or have you gone through so many Christmases that you have become deadened to the mystery? In the fragility of a tiny baby crying at his mother’s breast, where livestock nervously move about, and a weary peasant leans against the wall pondering how he will care for his family, the hope of the world comes. This is Christmas.

No one else has the foggiest idea, however. No one even notices the child is born. No king, philosopher, priest, or religious leader is aware. No one knows, until a group of angels break the tranquility of the night sky outside Bethlehem where shepherds are keeping their flock. As they fill the quiet, night sky with their heavenly glory, they announce a message, a word of revelation, tidings of great joy.

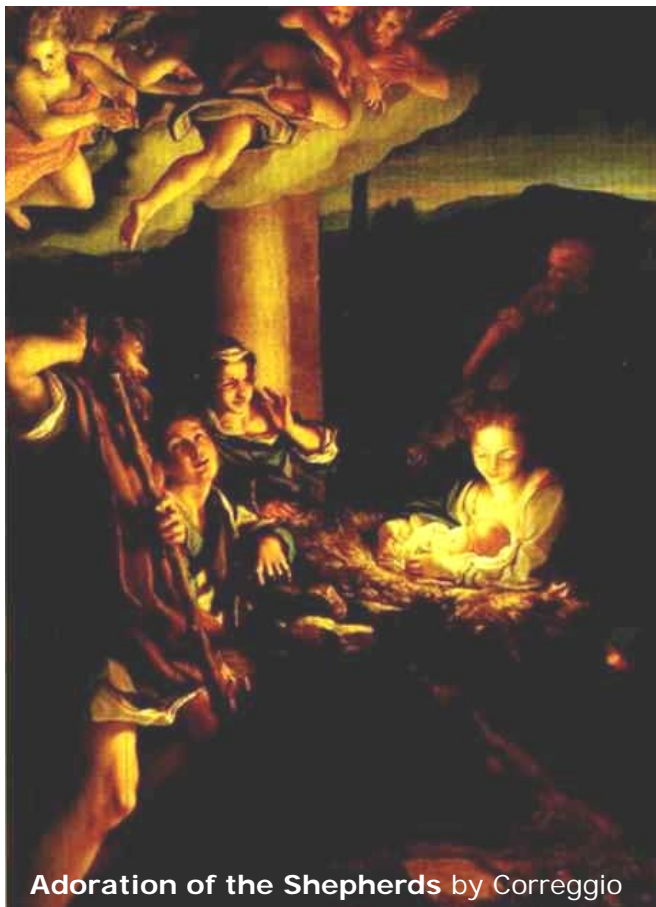
“A Savior has been born to you! The angels highlight a peasant child and say, “Hey, don’t be afraid. Here is a word of good news: A Savior has been born to you! You will know what we say is true, when you run into Bethlehem and find a broken hovel of a stable. Within you will see a peasant couple and a fragile baby wrapped in bands of cloth. When you see them, you will know God is at work among you. You will know there is a Savior.” Then the angels began to sing, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” The babe in the manger is the hope of the world, and this is Christmas.

The babe in the manger is exactly what we need. You see, we are foolish. We are disobedient. We are deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We live in malice and envy and hatred. That’s us! We are foreigners to the covenant of promise. We are far away, and without hope. We are hopeless!

We are a hopeless cause. We can’t fix ourselves. We can’t make our day better by trying harder. We have no future. We have no promise. We have no hope! That’s us! We couldn’t change if we wanted to. Try as hard as we might, no matter how hard we tried, we are hopeless.

The good news the angels sing over us, however, is, “A Savior has been born to you.” We needed delivering, and God has provided a deliverer. We needed redeeming, and God has provided a redeemer. We can be forgiven. We can be pardoned. We can experience reconciliation with God. We can become sons and daughters of God. A Savior has been born to us! This is Christmas.

Jesus is our hope for He is the only one who can rescue us from the brokenness of our world. He is the only one who can deliver us from the shackles of sin, death, and hell that so dominate our day-to-day to reality. This is Christmas. Jesus is our Christmas.



Adoration of the Shepherds by Correggio

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The HouseHoldLeader is proud to be one with the Filipino community in this year’s Christmas novena masses.

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