Among ancient peoples, stories were told to explain almost everything. For instance, I came across one not too long ago that explains why human beings have that little indentation above their upper lip. The story goes that before we are born, we are visited by an angel who whispers a secret to us. It is the secret of where we will find true happiness. Then the angel presses a finger to our lips and says, “Don’t tell.” When we are born, we retain the mark of the angel’s finger but we don’t remember the secret because we don’t know enough yet to understand its meaning. But the indentation above our lips is a reminder that it is possible to find true happiness.

As with most ancient stories that have survived, this one speaks a certain truth about life – that is, that we all have a desire to find the secret to true happiness. And we live with a deep sense that such a secret really exists. And though we may find ourselves at certain points in life where we have become disillusioned and think that there really is no pathway to true happiness for us, I don’t think we ever completely rid ourselves of the hope that we will somehow manage to come to a place where we will find it.

So we continue to look for it in things that seem appealing to us – in romantic involvements, in nature, in sports, art, music, food and fantasy. And perhaps these pursuits do lead to some wonderful moments – moments when we do experience great happiness
and a deep sense of well-being. But then something happens and the happiness is gone. Still, such experiences do put us in touch with that secret planted deep within us, and rekindles our hope that it is possible to find true happiness. So we continue to long for it and look for it.

But perhaps we wonder at times why God would create us with such a longing, and then make it so hard for us to find a way to fulfill it. Is God a sadist? Does he like to see us suffer? Does he get a kick out of dangling a carrot in front of our noses and watching us run after it? Well, if God has truly made himself known to us in Jesus, then surely this can’t be the case. And it’s not the case. In Jesus God has shown us the pathway to true happiness. The trouble is that it isn’t immediately recognizable because so many people keep telling us that true happiness is to be found in what we get rather than in what we give.

Thankfully, in the reading from Revelation, we have been given a picture of where true happiness will be found. There the author speaks of the holy city Jerusalem coming down out heaven when God’s saving work is completed and his kingdom is established in all its fullness. Clearly, in the author’s mind it is in this place that our desire for true happiness will be fulfilled. So what is there about this city that is so wonderful? God is present there and in a way that will be recognizable to all its inhabitants. This city is
described as gleaming with the splendor of God. What the author of Revelation is telling us here is that dwelling in the light of God’s presence is where true happiness is to be found.

So how do we get to that light? Well, the good news is that we don’t have to get to it. What the gospel proclaims is that the light that fills the heavenly Jerusalem already has come to us. In the eighth chapter of John’s Gospel Jesus says, “I am the light of the world, whoever follows me will have the light of life.” This is the pathway to true happiness – following the one who is the light of the world to that place where there is only light. And what does this mean, exactly? Well, Jesus made it pretty clear in last Sunday’s gospel when he said to those who would follow him, “A new commandment I give to you, love one another as I have loved you.”

This is the way to stay in the light and come to the place of true happiness – following the one who was so filled with compassion for those who were struggling that he was compelled to reach out to them in ways that eased their burdens and helped them move toward that place of true happiness.

We saw a concrete example of what it means to love as Jesus loves in our reading from Acts today. There we found the leaders of the church in Jerusalem responding to a concern that had been brought to them. This was the concern: after Gentiles had been
brought into the church by Paul and Barnabas, others had come along afterwards and told them that unless they were circumcised and followed the Jewish law they could not be saved. In a sense it was like someone coming to you after you had purchased a home in a certain community and saying, “By the way, did they show you the book of rules you have to follow? And did anyone tell you that to live here you have to be branded with the community’s logo?” Well, this is pretty much what happened to the Gentile converts to the faith. And needless to say, they were pretty shaken up by what they had been told, since being circumcised and following the Jewish law wasn’t part of the package presented to them by Paul and Barnabas when they brought them into the church.

So, when the matter was brought to them, how did the leaders of the church in Jerusalem respond? Well, with great compassion really. They apologized to the Gentile converts who had been so deeply disturbed by those who had spoken to them without authorization. And they concluded, “It is the decision of the Holy Spirit and us not to place any burden on you. We only ask that you observe those few biblical mandates for non-Jews who live among the Jewish people anywhere, so you can all live together in peace.” Here the leaders of the church were following the example of Jesus, loving as Jesus loved, moving in the light of his Spirit – responding compassionately to those who
had been troubled, reaching out to them with words of healing that brought them to a place of peace and happiness.

Today we will be baptizing four children into this community that has chosen to follow Jesus in the way of compassionate outreach, in the way of love. I know that at times, people have spoken of this sacrament of baptism as though it were about something other than this – that its primary purpose is to protect a child in case of a premature death, so they can be admitted to heaven. To me, such thinking is a terrible misrepresentation of the God who has made himself known to us in Christ. Would the God whose very nature is compassionate outreach ever keep children out of heaven because they had not been baptized? How could we possibly think this? We do not baptize children as a preventative measure. Rather, in baptism, the Spirit of the risen Christ, the one who is the light of the world is imparted to them as an abiding presence. That’s why those who are baptized receive a lighted candle -- because it is by walking in his light, in his way of compassionate outreach, that they will come to the place of true happiness.