

O come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant, O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem.

This journey to Bethlehem has been a long time coming. Our preparations for this night, stalled weeks ago when we were frozen with ice, sealed in our homes and kept from our daily rounds, has finally, thankfully melted away. We now easily and comfortably gather for worship to welcome the newborn King.

We come—the faithful and the joyful, as well as those less sure, and those filled with doubt to this exquisite, historic church. If these stones could speak, they would resound with hundreds of years of joy-filled Christmases past. They would say welcome to this haven of wonder, this haven of blessing, this haven of Christmas peace. They also might say “if you want to be truly accurate why don’t you rent one of the barns at the Hunt Club inviting everyone to worship in the steamy straw of the stables there re-creating the birth of our Savior so long ago?” The unaccustomed smell of the barns would likely overwhelm us, but it would be accurate in what it was in that stable rude and bare in that little town of Bethlehem so long ago. We would be warmed not by the boilers in the basement, but solely by the heat of the animals and our own merry-making praying and singing the wonderful carols of Christmas. Thankfully, we are not in the stables tonight but in this wonderful church where, through the mysterious indwelling of the Holy Spirit, this place becomes at least in our hearts, the stable of Bethlehem. This is the place where with angels, sheep and shepherds and the Wise Ones from the East we come with joyful footsteps to worship; worship the new-born King. We come to see and feel again the wonder of our Savior’s birth.

We to hear the angels sing and to hear the story of love told again. We come—some of us with sugarplums dancing in our heads and others hoping that the magic we want to believe will slip through the world’s distractions that we and all we love will be transformed by the grace and goodness of God’s love poured out upon us.

For everyone present in this “stable” and other less grand and beautiful homes, rooms and inns, there will be nights of worry in the future. We know this, for there have been many nights of worry in our past—nights filled with stress, anxiety and worry about the wellbeing of our children, our marriages, our jobs and health; wondering if anyone “out there” cares about us; whether we matter in a world that spins seemingly so wildly out of control. So many among us are weary, poor in spirit, and wary. We wonder if God is really real. We wonder if God cares for us, could care for us since we have so little regard for ourselves. Why would God want to love us, some may ask? We are not worthy of that love. I want to remind those among us who think this way or feel this way about ourselves, that in Matthew’s long list of Jesus’ forbears, (the opening verses of the Gospel) one finds not only a list of God’s faithful whom might expect, but also and especially a long list of adulterers, murderers, rebels, conspirators, transgressors of all sorts, both the fearful and the bold. The Gospel lists them because Jesus’ genealogy is not very illustrious. God uses the good and the not so good to fulfill God’s purposes. In spite of what we think or believe about ourselves and how bad we are, God’s purposes are not thwarted.

This is the night in which God declares in a dramatic, yet simple, easily overlooked way that you—**every one of you**—matters. You matter so much that God, our gracious loving God; more than anything in all the world who wants to love and be loved by you, has reached out through time and space to demonstrate how communion with God happens, even and especially in God-forsaken stables of straw, mud and cold in the most obscure place on the face of the earth.

Christmas is not about what **we do** and **who we are**, but about the love of God whose affirmation and appreciation is poured out this night not only on the good, but upon all of humankind. If we are able to dream the dream and live the love of Christmas, no one of us could ever think of ourselves—ever—as God-forsaken.

*Mild he lays his glory by, born that we no more may die;
Born to raise us from the earth, born to give us second birth.
Risen with healing in his wings, light and life to all he brings,
Hail, the Sun of Righteousness! Hail, the heaven-born Prince of Peace!*

Hark the herald angels sing glory to the new-born King!

With this newly awakened sensitivity we turn from our old ways and hear; if not the stirrings and rustle of angel wings, at least the deepest murmuring of our own hearts. In this moment of quiet so infrequently experienced and so rarely explored, we begin to smell and know again not just the dung and the dirt, but the fragrant sounds of silence. And in this new light, we see the sounds of simple grace, and hear the candlelight as it all comes together—sparks of incarnation (Immanuel) catching fire in our hearts.

There is a feeling and a believing on Christmas Eve without parallel in our lives. Behold, this is the nighttime of Incarnation, God coming into the world—our God magnificently and simply showing God's love for you and all of creation. This is our God, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace born in a stable of wet and smelly straw, splintered wood and obscure village of Bethlehem. This is the night whether in stable, church or tenement, when an ancient yet ever new and wondrous mystery comes alive: 'tis Christmas. *Born to raise us from the earth, born to give us second birth.* To Mary a child is born, to us a new life is given and his name shall be called Immanuel—God with us. Thanks be to God.