

Christmas Eve 2022  
Saint Aidan's Episcopal Church, Portland OR  
The Rev'd Canon Raggs Ragan. Interim Rector

In the Name of Jesus, born as one of us that we might live fully, in joy and love and hope. Amen.

Tonight we have accepted the invitation from God and the Church to 'go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which God has made known to us.'

This celebration is different from our usual worship gatherings, not least because it is at night, in the dark. It feels appropriate since our world seems so dark, but into this darkness bursts God's unfailing light, the light of love and joy and hope in the person of a brand-new baby, a baby like all others, fully human and so fully dependent, and yet a baby like no other, fully divine, part of the heart of God.

People over the centuries have written beautiful poetry and long eloquent discourses, volumes and volumes of words and ideas trying to capture the wonder that we celebrate tonight. Much of the poetry comes down to us in our hymns, and Joseph has done a lovely job of including many of them in this service to give us the broadest possible experience of them, to share the poetic expression as we sing together.

Our hymns remind us that the miracle of Christmas, God coming among us as one of us to fully participate in human life, is for everyone. No one is left out. All are created in the image of God and so all are embraced in the divine love expressed in this humble birth, with the ox and ass, the cow and the donkey, warming mother and child with their breath as she lays him on the hay of their feeding trough. It is a humble image, not an image of power or extravagance, an image accessible to the poorest people anywhere.

Part of our focus is on the stable, which was probably in a cave, cold and damp and dark. And part of our focus is on ourselves, where we fit into this picture. It was Saint Francis who began the custom of creating crèche scenes, in his time with living people and animals in a local cave, so that people could experience more directly the wonder of this birth. Now we have crèche scenes on our mantles and under our trees at home, here in front of the altar, in yards and parks, and on countless Christmas cards. Saint Francis invited people to contemplate the immediacy, the physical reality of this remarkable event, not to just speculate about it in the abstract, but to really see it, to be like the shepherds or the magi – or the innkeeper's daughter, to imagine this happening in our own direct experience. Because the other part of the focus is on ourselves, specifically on our hearts. How are our hearts changed by seeing this, thinking about it, singing about it?

When he created the sequence of carols for this service, Joseph happened to choose my very favorite Christmas poem as the hymn to sing after the sermon. I love Christina Rossetti's poetry which is always lovely and deeply moving. This particular poem is so broad in its appeal that it has more than once been made into a children's book.

Rossetti begins by setting the scene in the cold and dark of winter, emphasizing the vulnerability of the Holy Family, and by extension, of all of us struggling to live our human lives. She vividly describes the scene, bringing in the physicality of the straw and the animals and the nursing mother. Then she invites us into the scene – everyone else seems to have a gift to give, a way to honor and aid the Holy Child. We think of the gifts of the Magi, the animals surrendering their feeding trough, each one, human and animal and angel, pictured as adoring God made flesh in this brand new baby, expresses their adoration with a gift. The poet invites us into the scene, not only as observers, but as participants. But to participate means to bring our own gift.

What can I give him, poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb,  
if I were a wise man I would do my part,  
yet what I can I give him, give my heart.

That is the invitation, to come and see what God has done for us, and to allow ourselves to be moved to offer our own hearts to the baby, to God in Christ born for us – who lives and dies and rises, all for us. We are invited to give our hearts so that we can be God-bearers like Mary, bringing Christ into all the dark places of our world, so that we can open our hearts to be filled with compassion for all the suffering in our world, so that we can be strengthened for lives of loving service wherever we find ourselves.

What can we give him? – give our hearts, and that is enough! Amen.