

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our heart be acceptable in your sight. You, O God, are our rock, our strength, our resurrection, and our redeemer. Amen.

Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house,
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.
The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,
In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there;
The children were nestled all snug in their beds...

Yeah right.

Is that what Christmas Eve is like in your house? Where is the last-minute gift wrapping, the kids sneaking out of bed to see if Santa has arrived yet, the family drama, the binge-eating of holiday snacks?

I don't know about you, but the peaceful imagery painted by this classic poem is just not relatable to my experiences of Christmas.

Perhaps I could personalize it a bit, to reflect how I experience this holiday...

Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the church,
The preacher stepped up to the pulpit, her perch.
The hymns and the candles were chosen with care,
In hopes that God's Spirit would soon show up there.

Not a bad start! But...

This still seems a bit too calm and peaceful.

What happens when the copier stops working before the bulletins are printed, or when we run out of candles, or the entire choir gets laryngitis?

And anyway, where did this peaceful image of Christmas come from to begin with?

The first Christmas wasn't so relaxing.

Imagine:

A young woman who was 9 months pregnant with her first child was forced to leave her home, and when she got to her destination, there wasn't even a bed for her. And then she went into labor. As we know, giving birth is messy and noisy, and sometimes even life-threatening.

Christmas has been complicated from the very beginning.

Mary did have family support, as we know from her visit with Elizabeth. But it's also likely that she and Joseph had to endure some family drama once they found out that she was pregnant before the wedding.

Maybe that's a relief – family stress at the holidays has been around forever! It's not just your family, or mine!

The first Christmas was also complicated by travel, as many of ours are now.

Mary and Joseph were able to find shelter, but it probably wasn't the most comfortable, and was far from the sanitary peacefulness of today's maternity wards. Sometimes finding shelter on a cold night is difficult.

Hopefully none of you find yourselves so vulnerable on Christmas this year, but still – traveling is difficult, whether it's for the sake of visiting family or for more political reasons, as it was for Mary and Joseph.

In today's world, it often feels like “silent night” is far from the truth, and even “a holly jolly Christmas” can be a stretch.

Instead we end up with a hustle bustle Christmas, trying to fit in all the traditions from every branch of the family, plus the office party and the long-distance secret Santa gift exchange – or, alternately, we end up filling up our schedules so that we don't notice the obvious absence of a loved one this year, or the loneliness that is knocking at the door.

These are the reasons we come to church.

At worship tonight, we get to take a break from the busy-ness of Christmas celebrations to notice God incarnate in the world.

Sure, things have been plenty busy here at the church also, as we've been preparing for worship tonight and tomorrow. But if it isn't done yet, it's not getting done! It's time now to set all the concerns aside and focus on this moment of worship.

God has shown up in the world as a human baby.

At the end of the day, that's the most important thing about this time of year!

The creator of the universe adopted the most humble and vulnerable form that we would be able to understand, in order to grow closer in relationship to us.

The miraculous birth of Jesus to Mary is something so special and unique and holy that it is worth celebrating year after year.

But God showing up in the world?

That's not unique. That happens every day.

Scripture gives us the examples of the burning bush and a blinding light, and a still small voice at the mouth of a cave. Church history gives us the examples of thunderstorms and dreams and the beauty of creation. Our traditions and worship practices give us the examples of Baptism and Communion, music and the reading of the Word.

In the past few days, I've heard stories of God showing up in all kinds of ways!

Help paying for a car repair... receiving exactly the gift that was needed from a friend or family member... safe travels through inclement weather... getting discharged from the hospital early enough to celebrate Christmas with family.

God comes to us in both extraordinary and mundane ways!

And each of those times that we encounter God in our daily lives is a reason to celebrate.

God came to the world in a tangible form when Jesus was born that first Christmas.

And God continues to come to humankind in tangible forms – in real, messy, noisy, earthy, human ways.

That's the sacred good news of Christmas.

It's not just about the birth of a child. It's a celebration of the fact that God isn't scared of our humanity or our messiness. God comes to us no matter where we are or how ready we are to receive the presence of the divine.

This good news is for the whole world! The trick is being ready to hear it.

Would people in power have rejoiced over the birth of a child born to poor, unmarried parents, seeking refuge far from home? It seems unlikely.

So, God doesn't invite the movers and shakers of ancient Israel to meet the Divine at the manger. Instead, God sends the angels to the shepherds, to people who were just as poor and powerless as Jesus himself.

That's why we take a moment to pause and revel in the holiness of tonight. Not because the first Christmas was so quiet and peaceful and pristine, like a Hallmark card, or a Rockwell painting, or a picture print by Currier and Ives... but because it was so earthy, so real, so relatable.

The incarnation was for the sake of normal people, not just those in positions of power. God became human in order to be part of our everyday lives. Yes, God shows up in the candlelight and contemplation of Christmas worship. But the birth of Jesus reminds us that God also shows up in our busy-ness, our disorganization, our frustration, and our mess.

Tonight's good news is that whether tonight is silent or not, it certainly is holy. God has come to us, and God continues to come to us.

I think a rewrite of the beloved Christmas poem is in order.

'Twas the night before Christmas, and all 'round the world,
Strains of music and words of the Gospel were heard.

Wreaths, trees, and candles were lit with great care,
In hopes that Emmanuel soon would be there.

Even though people were busy and hurried,
The Savior arrived as though no one were worried.

Jesus was born and went straight to his work,
Loving all people, yes, even the jerks.

God enters our lives in the mess and the clatter,
As if to ask everyone, what is the matter?

Joy, peace, and hope from Emmanuel flow,
Bringing love to our hearts in ways we don't know.

The good news today is that God is with us,
As God was with Mary, the shepherds, and Joseph.

And the angels exclaimed, before leaving their sight,
Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night!