

Welcome! It's so wonderful to be here tonight, isn't it? Here in this warm, beautiful space...here with us virtually, wherever you are...here with whoever is sitting next to you, whether it is a loved one or someone you don't even know. There's such grace and blessing in simply sharing this moment. Let's just soak it in...breathe it in, slowly and deeply - breathe out, in again, then out.

It's hard to believe it's going on three years now since the pandemic turned our lives upside down. Since we learned, the hard way, that though solitude is nourishing for all of us, not being able to experience that sweet exchange of energy that takes place when we are in one another's presence is NOT good for us. Not at all. This year we are appreciating the simple goodness of being together in a way that we haven't for a long time. This year we are feeling especially grateful that we've made it here, to Christmas Eve.

The 100-mile trip to Bethlehem that Joseph and Mary had to make to that first Christmas Eve was long and difficult. For Mary, whose pregnancy was at full term, it was ten or eleven days of walking, or lurching on the back of a donkey. And for Joseph, who was responsible for her and the child's safety, it was a whole host of worries. After all, he was the reason they had to make the trip in the first place. What if the baby came before they got there? What if Mary went into labor on some lonely stretch of road, out in the open? And where, exactly, were they going to stay? Some say that he and Mary would have expected to find room with Joseph's extended family. If that's the case, it clearly didn't go well. Which would have only added to feelings of insecurity for this couple whose circumstances were already shaky at best.

But God didn't need things to be "just so" on that dark winter night so long ago. God didn't need all the things that we usually think are needed for Christmas to come - like beautiful decorations and wonderful gifts and everyone getting together, with lots of holiday cheer.

All God needed was a place to land. Just a small amount of human real estate. All God needed was a couple of human hearts cracked open, just a little. Because God's entire agenda for that first Christmas Eve was simply to arrive. To be born into the fragile and broken world that God so loved. And begin writing the next chapter in God's relationship with that world. A chapter in which God becomes personally and intimately involved as Emmanuel - which means "God with us" in Hebrew.

From the very beginning, God has been the One in whom we humans live, and move, and have our being. Now, God is taking that to another level. The theological term for this is incarnation. Which literally means “in flesh”. In Mary’s baby, God enters into our humanity in all of its fullness and its flaws, its power and pain, its joys and sorrows. Even into our experience of death itself! To defeat its determined grip on our existence, and show us the way to find life on the other side of it. To experience eternal life, both in the present, and in the future that we cannot see.

And God’s sole purpose in doing so, and the *telos*, the end of all of God’s Christmas planning, is love. Simply love. The love preached and lived by the man that child would grow up to be. The one who taught us and showed us what God’s love looks like, wrapped in human skin. Love that comes toward us, that welcomes us, that walks alongside us, that suffers with us, that rejoices with us, that celebrates with us, and that never leaves us.

God didn’t come to punish, or frighten, or scold, or threaten, or any of those other hurtful things that often get attributed to God. God came to tell us, and to show us, that we are loved, deeply, truly, and forever. And you and I don’t have to do anything to earn that love. To deserve it. To be worthy of it. We can only receive it.

Now it could seem that I am implying that all of the efforts that we make in our celebration of Christmas, all of our preparations don’t really matter. That it’s not really what Christmas is supposed to be about. I mean, it’s about God, right? It’s not about us.

But no, Christmas is so very much about us too. Because the incarnation is not just a revelation of who God is. Incarnation is also a revelation of who we are. In entering into human experience God is being very clear: our humanity matters. Which means who you and I are and what we do matters.

A former professor of mine, Dr. Karoline Lewis, put it this way: “[the incarnation is] everything about you. It is this radically reciprocal reality. God’s commitment to being human in Jesus is God also saying *I am committed to you being you. To you being fully, truly you.*

And when we are mindful of that radical reality, that divine commitment to every one of us in our unique “us-ness”, when you and I are willing to lean into it, to receive what

God is bestowing upon us and in us, then all that we bring: all of our labors of love and desires for warmth and good cheer; all of our hopes and dreams for joy and peace; all the gifts we offer; all of these finite human things can become bearers of the infinite. They can be sacraments of God's love and God's presence right here.

All God needs is that little bit of real estate in us. And all that you and I need is a willingness to be amazed. To lean back in our pews, and simply take in the beauty and the wonder of this holy night. The music, the choir, the worship, the community, the remembering...all of these gifts of the Incarnation that we are celebrating. Just let all of that sink in.

So that later, when Christmas is over and done, we will have been reminded, once again, that God has come, and keeps coming, to us and in us. And the Christ child will have found a place, once again, that is safe and warm and welcoming. And God's love will shine just a bit brighter in this still fragile and broken world.