

On this holy night, I speak to you in the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. *Amen.*

This past Monday evening, St. Francis Day School children performed their annual Christmas program for parents and friends. As you might imagine with a group of preschoolers, it was precious chaos. For some of those children, it was their time to shine. For others, despite hours of preparation, there was stage fright and forgotten lyrics, an inability to focus on the moment, skewed halos, and with a few of them, an obvious desire to be somewhere else doing something different.

It occurs to me that tonight we are not unlike those children. Each of us comes to this celebration of our Lord's birth with our hearts and minds in a unique place, feeling different emotions and thinking different things. We may be remembering Christmases past, people and places that are no longer part of our lives. We might be thinking ahead to what's left to be done when we get home tonight, or how we'll spend the day tomorrow. Our lives are often frantic, fragmented, and unfortunately sometimes they are also fractured. Like the day school children, a few of us may even wish we were somewhere else doing something different this evening. God knows these things about us, of course, and they are just a few of the many reasons, although they are minor ones, that God came to live among us, to catch our attention first as a holy and precious baby, and later as a man who preached God's love and mercy and grace, and died doing so.

Tonight God invites us to put aside everything that distracts us so that we may worship with all our hearts, with body, mind, and spirit. Let's do that by praying again the Collect for Purity found in your bulletin on page _____. Please pray it with me.

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid. Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspirations of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Thank you! Now let's take a deep breath, relax, and recall the events that took place more than two thousand years ago. Isn't it amazing, that we're remembering something from so long ago, when often we have a hard time remembering what happened last week? That's because this is "heart stuff." A recent television program about the life of Jesus included interviews with several scholars who have studied the circumstances of Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection, as they "really" happened. We always seem to hear from these folks around Christmas and Easter, and while their information is fascinating, it really should not make any difference to our faith at all whether Jesus was born in a stable or a cave, or whether that was because there was no room in the inn, or because the young couple sought a place of privacy for the baby's birth. These are not the reasons why we worship the Christ child. We worship him because God sent him to fill a hole in our hearts, a spiritual hole in our individual hearts, and that has become a gigantic hole in the heart of the world.

The Gospel of Luke gives us the most descriptive narrative of Jesus' birth, how God used Jesus' earthly family to make it happen and then drew the shepherds and others to Bethlehem so that they could see the baby for themselves and then go to tell others about him. In Luke's account, there is much joy and rejoicing, despite what was happening in the world. The civilized world then was smaller, remember; nonetheless, it was a time of political unrest, oppression, violence, poverty and fear. We imagine that the world has never been as bad off as it is now, forgetting that it has never been the place of peace, justice, equality, mercy, and love that God intended at creation. God sent God's own son into the world to make those things right, and charged those who wondered at the birth with the task of proclaiming the greatness of the Lord, with joy and rejoicing. "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors. Like our Lord's mother Mary, we must treasure all these words, and ponder them in our hearts.

This “heart stuff” may be problematic for us, because we guard our hearts in order to protect ourselves. The times we live in are not easy. We are surrounded by distrust, violence, hatred. God’s peace that passes all understanding seems unreachable because we’ve let ourselves become preoccupied with what is going on around us rather than what is within us. When we live through our minds, we have some measure of control over what we say and do, and how others’ words and actions affect us. When we open our hearts, we become vulnerable, unprotected, open to pain and suffering, but also to love. We cannot love only with our minds; in order to love truly and deeply, we must also engage our hearts. Love is what makes us whole, and the wholeness love gives us is what sets us free from the burdens we create in our minds.

In his book, *What Do You Want for Christmas?* James W. Moore recalls the story of a twelve-year-old boy in Southern California who was brought to the hospital after being thrown from a horse.¹ “The boy was so traumatized by that frightening experience that he had become the victim of an emotional paralysis. He was paralyzed in a prison of fear. His eyes were open, but he stared straight ahead. He made no recognition of anyone else, and he would not move or speak. He would make no response to anyone or to anything.

“The doctors said there was nothing physically wrong with him—no bruises or cuts or broken bones, no concussion. The diagnosis was that he had been literally “scared stiff,” frightened into some kind of psychosomatic paralysis. Day after day, the boy lay in bed in that kind of semiconscious state of mind and spirit, totally unresponsive. Nothing reached him.

“Finally, one day in a moment of inspiration, one of the nurses brought in a baby, a happy six-month-old baby. The nurse laid the baby on the boy’s stomach. The baby started cooing and scratching the little boy’s stomach. And then the baby crawled up and began to touch the little boy’s face.

“Suddenly, the twelve-year-old boy smiled, and then he hugged the baby and patted him and kissed him on the top of his head. Amazingly, that twelve-year-old boy had come back to life. He began to talk and respond and recognize, and in just a few days the doctors pronounced that he was well, and they let him go home.”

God sent God’s own son Jesus Christ into the world so that the world, through him, might be saved. He sent a baby to crawl up into our hearts, to touch us in love. Open our hearts, dear Lord, that we may perfectly love you in return, and worthily magnify your holy name. *Amen.*

¹ Moore, James W. *What Do You Want for Christmas? An Advent Study for Adults.* Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2008. P. 23.