

St. Giles' Episcopal Church
Christmas Eve 2011
Luke 2:1-20
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14)

Tonight we celebrate, in prayer, in the reading of scripture and in beautiful music, the awesome mystery of God’s incarnation in Jesus, the baby wrapped in bands of cloth, lying in a manger. From the moment of the angel Gabriel’s announcement to Mary of God’s plan for the conception of Jesus, the human experience of “Emmanuel,” “God with us,” took on new meaning. Divine life and human life were joined in a new way. The birth of Jesus changed the relationship between God and humankind forever. The church calls us, in this holy hour of worship, to contemplate the mystery of Christ’s birth.

In this holy mystery we see that what appeared ordinary – a young mother and a baby, a stable and a manger, animals and shepherds – was truly an event unlike any other in human history. In this holy mystery we see that God surprises us and appears where no one would expect to find God. Tonight we celebrate a mystery that is only beginning with the birth of Jesus, a mystery that cannot grow old and will never end because it is eternal, the mystery of God’s love. God invites us into this mystery of love and draws us close to the Holy Family. Imagine with me what Joseph and Mary and Jesus might want to share with us tonight.

Joseph is weary but his heart is full of love for the infant sleeping in the manger and for the child’s mother. He thinks to himself, “What a long journey this has been! Eighty-five miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. And poor Mary! I was so worried about her. If she hadn’t been engaged to me, she wouldn’t have had to make this journey. If

only she could have stayed with her mother and aunts. They would have made her comfortable and known how to help her with the birth. The poor woman had only me for a midwife, and to have this precious child in a stable, of all things! But God, holy and merciful God, kept us safe in his care, and we are all well now. When we go back home, I'd like to tell my friends: As long as God guides you, keep on the road no matter how long and hard it is. Don't give up, because God will see you safely to the end of the journey."

Mary gazes at the baby Jesus with love and awe. "When the angel told me about this child, I never thought that he – the Son of the Most High – would be born in a stable! For nine months I pondered the angel's words, but nothing I imagined was like this. When we get home, I'm going to talk to Elizabeth. She'll understand. She was surprised by God, too – her first baby in her old age! I want her to go with me to tell our friends how wonderful God's gifts are, how full and deep and good, beyond our understanding, and so real and true. Maybe they will believe us and wait patiently for God to bless them, too."

The baby Jesus gazes at his mother as she leans close to him. They look into one another's eyes, and their love for each other is received, returned, reflected brightly in the dim light of the stable. The infant Jesus has no words, only a tiny and vulnerable body that reaches out to his mother for her love and care. He is reaching out to us and gazing at us, with eyes full of love. Tonight we open our hearts to the love we feel for the Christ child. Like his mother, we return his gaze of love and reach out tenderly to this holy infant.

We also remember that the infant Jesus whom we adore tonight grew into a man. And that man draws all our love. Human love is not only tender. Our love may be stern and strong. It may be searching, desperate, aching. Our love may feel like a hunger and thirst that will never be satisfied. Our love may be tentative and full of doubt, or pleading and full of longing. Our love may be the love of compassion and sympathy. The human heart may be set on fire with love, joyful and ecstatic love. Jesus calls us to love him with all our love, with full hearts and broken hearts, in youth and old age, whatever life may bring.

In the hymn before the gospel we sang and prayed, “O holy Child of Bethlehem ... be born in us today.” Birth is only the beginning. Luke records that “Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor” (Luke 2:52). Jesus – born in us – calls us to grow with him, asks us to allow him room to grow in our hearts. St. Paul tells us that Jesus calls all of his followers to “the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13).

Tonight we open our hearts as we worship the infant Jesus. May this holy child draw all of us further and further in to the eternal mystery of God’s love. Tonight is a night for falling in love with God! Amen.