

Why are you here tonight? What has drawn you to worship on this particular evening?

Is it because you always go to church and you simply cannot imagine being anywhere else on this Christmas Eve?

Or, is it because you are with your family and they expected you to come with them?

Have you come this evening because this is what you did growing up and something about this night draws you back in?

Or, are you in worship because you are searching—you are not sure for what or for whom, but you just have this feeling there has to be more to life than what you can see around you?

Or, have you come to worship on this Christmas Eve because you are lonely, or grieving, or feeling lost? Because it has been a hard Fall and appears it might be an even bleaker winter and you simply need to be among people in a safe space, a holy space?

## **Are any of these reasons why you are here, in this place, on this holy night?**

For some of us, maybe it is a mixture of several reasons all rolled together and intermingled. Regardless, whatever the reason, whatever the motivation, whatever has drawn you into worship tonight, I am going to bet that at some level, it has to do with the baby.

At some level, your reason for being here is intertwined with a desire to look into the manger again. The desire to see, again, whom exactly is in that manger and try, again, to comprehend just what that particular baby means for us and for our world.

It is one reason I am here. I am here to look into the manger again. I am here to see that baby's face and to listen to his story. Because most of the time when I look around, unlike the shepherds in Luke's Gospel, I do not see angels singing, or the heavens opening, or the cries of the newborn Jesus. Most of the time when I look around, I see a world still very much shrouded by the darkness of which Isaiah spoke.

For if darkness is meant to suggest wars between nations and conflict between people, I see that darkness. If darkness is meant to suggest a sense of uncertainty about the future, I certainly see that darkness these days. If darkness is meant to suggest a world in which no one sees each other very well, if at all, I see that darkness too.

And so, given what looks to be the hold of the darkness in our world, I simply **have** to be here, in this place, on this particular evening. I must witness and participate in the baptism of sweet baby Clair to remember we are all children claimed by God. I must watch the Christ candle being lit again, to evoke all the hope and possibility that simple act implies.

I must come to the table and take communion, quietly singing carols, looking into your faces and being nourished in my faith by the earthly elements of bread and wine.

But most of all, given what looks to be the hold of darkness in our world, I must once again look into that manger and drench myself in the mystery of the incarnation, the gift of God becoming Emmanuel, God-with-us.

For when we look into that manger, we first see the face of the baby Jesus. But when we look into that manger, we also see the face of God. When we look into that manger, we see the concrete reality and power of God's love in flesh and blood, just like us.

That baby in the manger reminds us that God loves us and this world so much that God simply could not stay away. God had to come and be one of us, one with us, so that we would know once and for all that no matter how much darkness we might see, it will not overcome us. For God's promised light proclaimed in Isaiah has already arrived in the face of the baby Jesus.

We come tonight and we look into the manger and see the face of a God who is strong enough to be a baby. We see the face of a God who is powerful enough to take on human weakness. We see the face of a God who not only holds all the oceans of the world in the palm of God's hand, but who also squirms in the straw, cries for his parents, and looks curiously at all the animals who are looking at him. That baby face of God is what we see when we look into the manger.

So whether you are here on this Christmas Eve because of curiosity or guilt, whether you are here out of routine or a deep desire for meaning, whatever has drawn you to this place, I hope that you will take the time tonight to look and see. To look into the manger. To see that baby's face. I hope you will pause and consider what it means that God did not decide to simply act from above to save us, that God did not decide to forcefully swoop in with all power and might, nor did God decide to create us and walk away, leaving us to stew in our own sinfulness and despair.

Rather, when we look in that manger, we see that in Mary's body, God became one of us; not in theory, but in reality, so that we would know **forever** how God literally embraces us and this world.

In the baby Jesus, God became one of us, one for us, one with us, so that we could see that indeed, Isaiah's promise has come true:

The light shines in the darkness and the darkness shall never overcome it. That proclamation is what we see when we look into the manger this evening. That proclamation is what we celebrate and live. That proclamation is the basis of incarnation. That proclamation is Christmas.

So come, look, and be astonished. And may that baby Savior's face give you strength and courage. Amen.