

St. Thomas's Episcopal Church
Christmas Eve 2024

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

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 1:1-14

It was the night *before* the night before Christmas and I went to have dinner with some new friends at their beautiful house- a couple and their 9-year-old son. It was a wonderful evening the conversation flowed in the way that good conversations do, but at one point I started to worry that the nine-year-old, whose name is Nate, might be feeling a bit left out given, you know, the several decades between him and us, and so I turned to him and started chatting. I learned almost immediately that we both love music and so we were off and running. We talked about the genres we like and the instruments we play and then got into how instruments make sound and that got Nate thinking and he asked his parents if he could excuse himself from the table for a minute to go get something. I thought for sure it would be one of his instruments, but instead he came back a remarkable small device about the size of a Klondike bar that, as he showed us, could turn almost any surface into a resonator or essentially into a speaker for amplifying music. Nate demonstrated it on the wooden dining table, on a glass, on a coffee cup, a nearby box, really anything he could find that could vibrate, and I was completely mesmerized. Eventually we moved on to other subjects and it became time for him to go to bed. He said goodnight and went upstairs. After several minutes, his father could hear some noise from Nate's room and went up to be sure everything was OK. It wasn't long before Nate and his dad Vince came down the stairs together. With Vince walking beside him, Nate was holding a carefully- and rather beautifully-wrapped package. He brought it to the table and handed it to me. I opened it up and inside was that little speaker we'd been playing with at dinner that I had loved so much. "He wanted you to have it," Vince said.

Of course it immediately became among my favorite presents ever and of course I still have it. I'm sure I'll keep it forever. But it's interesting- as much as I loved getting that wonderful gift from Nate, I also struggled with it a little bit. I remember feeling happy but also as if I should have had something to give him as well, that something was kind of, I don't know, out of balance. It was surprisingly hard for me to receive his wonderful gift. I ran into his parents a week or so later and it was very much still on my mind. I said, "That was so kind of Nate- I've been thinking of

getting him something. Can you think of anything he would particularly like?" They smiled and said, "Oh, not at all. It really just made him happy to give it to you."

There's an old line about giving and receiving and I have to say that I find the giving easier in many ways- I love to think about what I might get each person on my list. And I guess sometimes I find it much harder to receive.

Tonight we are gathered here for a simple and wondrous reason: to receive the ultimate gift that any of us could ever be given — God's gift of God's own self — and the only question is what it might mean to receive that gift. God, the Creator God, the one who loved us into being, comes to us and says "I want to come and give you the gift of my own life, of my own self. I want to come and be with you, to walk with you, right here alongside you." That's an enormous and ultimate gift! How do we receive such a gift? God comes to us tonight and says "I want to give you the gift of new life; I want to give you the gift of eternity." That's an enormous and ultimate gift- how do we receive such a gift? God comes to us tonight and says to us, "I want to abide in you and you in me." That's an enormous and ultimate gift. How can we begin to even know what it would mean to receive a gift such as this?

Well, the good news is that on this radiant night of nights, after so much imagining, dreaming, hinting, flat-out asking, saving up, shopping and yes giving, we are simply invited into this beautiful place for these few precious, peaceful moments filled with story and music and the singing of this choir and the voices of these children. . . .to receive. To be given this most extraordinary gift. That's all. No gift of our own expected in return. We are just invited with love and in love, through love and by love Loveself to consider receiving the gift of peace passing all understanding, the gift of eternity.

And here's the best part. On this night of night, in the voices that surround us, the voices of our children and these beautiful singers and in our own voices, we hear the mystery and the *quiet but essential secret* of those who have been able to receive this wondrous and transfiguring gift simply because *their hearts are open*. That their hearts are open to preparing him room, in the words of the great carol. "God, unto you all hearts are open," we say each time we enter this place, and that's it. We come here and we open our hearts and minds to the surpassing gift of knowing God in our lives and in that openness we allow ourselves to receive.

And so we've heard and watched just now, right here, as the story has shown us as it always does those who, despite all odds, were able to be open to this gift and were so improbably yet so palpably able to receive it. The shepherds, tending to their flocks by night, were somehow open to receiving this gift, were somehow able to turn down the noise on the roughness and instability of their daily reality and to get themselves there! The wandering magi we know as the three kings were somehow open to receiving this gift and were able to navigate their way over field and fountain, moor and mountain, as the great old song reminds us, and certainly more, including highway robbers and wild animals and to get themselves there! And of course at the center of the story stands the one who remained open even when everything around her was closing in. Her standing, her place, her security, her future, her very life — it all closed in on her and somehow she remained open, ready to receive this gift that she knew from the beginning would turn her life entirely upside down.

And friends, *we've gotten ourselves here tonight*. Our hearts *are* open. We got ourselves here because we *are ready* to receive this gift. In her beautiful series on prayer over the past few weeks, Jane invited us to remember that in our awe and wonder at the beauty that surrounds us, we are open! That in our gratitude for all that got us through this year, we are open! That when we say "I can't do all of this on my own," we are open! And so here we are, on this night of nights, and in a moment we will all come to altar, hands stretched in front of us not to give, but to receive. And then to be sent into the world filled full with the gift of God among us and God within us knowing that we can return anytime to this wellspring of gift and grace and love, knowing that every moment of every day is rich and ripe and full and fragrant with the chance to know God better and to love God more, with the chance to open ourselves evermore to the gift of God's abiding and life-giving and eternal presence, with the chance for every heart to prepare him room and for heaven and nature to sing: Joy to the world! The Lord is Come!

Thanks be to God. Alleluia! Amen.