

Christmas Eve

4pm and 8:15pm

The Rev. Dr. Ian Burch

St. Chrysostom's Episcopal Church | Chicago, IL

December 24, 2025

Some of you will now and some of you will not know that we had an issue with our physical plant last week. We needed to investigate what, at the time, we thought was a gas leak. And so, the HVAC people, the gas company, and the city were all here along with our operations director, me, and our sexton—spelunking through the basements of the church and the school, trying to figure out what was wrong. It was such a mystery that the gas company shut off all our heat, and we had to close school for two days. Our poor operations director sat huddled in his cold office for 11 hours, liaising with different vendors, trying desperately to get our heat back on, while everyone else worked cozy from home. It was quite a roller coaster of 48 hours.

I appreciate that this isn't a very promising start to a Christmas sermon, but bear with me, and I'll get it all tied together and still have you home in time for cocktails.

While I was fielding texts and calls about this rickety old building—with its historic church but also modern and lovely school—I was marveling at how many

different people and departments it took to keep this all going. And I was also struck at how the closure of this facility—even for two days—was a real damaging event. We all agreed that we needed this church to be open and operating. But I'm not sure that we ever stopped to wonder why. Why does this church need to be open?

I don't need to tell you the story of Christmas again. It's the one story in the entire Bible that I can be sure that every member of this church knows. Mary, Joseph, baby, God, angels, shepherds, Herod. If you're more advanced, you'll know a bit about Elizabeth, the wise men from the East, and the flight to Egypt after Jesus' birth. But that stuff is really just for extra credit. If you know that God came down to earth on Christmas, then you get full marks.

Each time, at this year, my social media feed is filled with pastors sending out well-meaning but really boring articles about how Jesus was probably born in a basement instead of a stable. Or maybe in Nazareth instead of Bethlehem. Or that he had siblings. Or that he was really a rabbi. Or other bits of historical guesses that poke some holes in the somewhat fanciful story we hear in the Bible.

But, for my money, I'm sticking with the story that is immortalized in song and art and poetry and generations of devotion. I am sticking with the manger.

It's a little strange for us sophisticated urban people to spend our Christmas evening thinking about what is essentially a feeding trough for livestock. We take it for granted, but if you give it a think, you'll realize that it's pretty scandalous to think that a teenaged mother placed God Himself in a manger. Not a gold bassinet. Not a throne. A manger. What a strange little detail upon which the largest religion in the history of the world was founded. God needed a rest, and Mary got creative.

My imagination has been fixed on this manger all week. And when I tried to figure out why, I decided that the church and the manger are the same thing. And, in fact, the reason that we spent two days scrambling so hard to make sure our church was in good shape is that we know that this church the vessel into which God has been placed. The church is not holy because of the stained glass or the silk or the music or the priests. The church is not holy because of the candles or the woodwork or the icons. The church is holy because God is here. And each week in this beautiful manger, we tell stories of God's presence with us. Each week the story is different, but each week the core is the same—God is here. Even when we feel like we don't deserve it. Even when we don't always feel it. Even when despair over the state of the world. God is here.

And how much more do we feel this at Christmas? How much more do we discern the existence of God among us then when we return to Bethlehem? Then when we follow the star. Then when we listen to the voices of the angels, singing

that the earth is made new because God has been placed in a manger? So, yes, we build our mangers much fancier in this day and this age, but God's presence has not changed. And it is that very presence that we bow to at Christmas.

And now you have a job to do. Now that you know without a doubt that God is in this place just as much as God was in the manger, it's your job to use your every skill—your brains, your bodies, your money, your creativity, your power—to make this world worthy for the Christ child. It is your job to take the power of the presence of God out into the weary world. I know that you can do it. I know that you can make your life into a song about God's love for this world at Christmas.

And so here we are, in our own version of the manger, feeling the warm presence of almighty God. You will be made a powerful people because of God coming down at Christmas. Use that power for good. Heal the sick, inside and outside these walls. Tend to the poor, inside and outside these walls. Create the kind of world into which you would want the Christ child to be born.

And remember that, each time you walk into these doors, you are coming into a manger—a vessel for the very presence of God. Merry Christmas. Amen.