

A Christmas Eve 2025  
St Barnabas's Church, Falmouth MA  
The Rev. David M. Rider  
December 24, 2025

Luke 2: 1-20

After long and bustling days of preparation, we gather in the quiet beauty of this night to thank God for the greatest gift of all, Christ our newborn Savior

As Christians have done for centuries, we celebrate the Feast of the Incarnation, God's ultimate gift of taking on human flesh to come among us

Luke's Gospel provides serene details of shepherds and angels witnessing the joyous chaos of Jesus' birth

Whether we find this season exhilarating, exhausting—or both—we pause tonight, take a slow cleansing breath and say, “Thank you, Lord Jesus, for coming among us as friend and redeemer”

Most of us have been round this barn many times, so we should note the potential danger of celebrating the nativity for 2000 years

The passing of centuries can air brush the rough edges of our story

Let's remember that the first and last hours of Jesus' life were anything but serene for this road-tested Savior

Matthew's Gospel provides more harrowing details than Luke's regarding a raging Herod, potential infanticide, midnight escape and refugee status in a foreign land, all before Jesus is out of diapers

But Luke brings us the kinder, gentler—yet still hectic—realities of Jesus' birth

At Bethlehem, we suspect young Mary is fully dilated before she ever gets off the pack mule

Anxious Mary and Joseph find no room in the inn, no birthing center catering to their whims; they must make due with musty straw

No doubt, the scene is chaotic yet holy

Amid human fear and impromptu midwifery, God breaks into our world and takes on the risks, realities and joys of human flesh—and all becomes well amid a spent placenta and bleating sheep

When I think about it, I can't imagine a better setting to enter the human fray

Jesus was born of Mary, who herself was born of a people shaped by God's word

Mary had listening bred in her bones and spiritual DNA

Sarah and Hannah and other faithful listeners were her forebears

Throughout their land, caves and mountain peaks marked where divine discourse had overtaken some childless couple, or shepherd, or scribe and brought blissful havoc to their lives

Mary had doubtless heard these stories and seen sites where the Word of the Lord had laid hold upon this or that clueless person

According to Luke, as Christ grew within her, Mary pondered what she heard in her heart

She took things deep within and let them rest until they came to full term and were ready to be born into the living form of God's intention: until they were ready to take on flesh

In doing so, Mary remains a model of discipleship for you and me tonight

These birth and childhood vignettes weave a Christmas tapestry that holds our attention like few others in Scripture, yet the collective biblical witness pays but the briefest attention to Jesus' actual birth

While we rejoice in this miracle, we avoid the temptation to keep Jesus infantilized, domesticated or unable to accomplish the gritty work of human redemption, for he is no petting-zoo Savior

All too quickly, Jesus grows up—and so must we

No doubt, each of us taps into our inner child as we open gifts, relive holiday rituals and work against forcing the “perfect” Christmas upon our loved ones

Like Jesus himself, Scripture pushes us to grow up and live into the full stature of Christ

This holy season helps us recognize both the beauty and pain of this world

In Christ, we move toward a realistic self-assessment that identifies our gifts and our brokenness

We live into a faith that embodies adult responsibility as it grasps our needs for a divine savior

Every Christmas holiday yields a dynamic tension in its mood

Whether by personality or family dynamic, some of us want adrenaline-filled events, belting out hymns or spiritual high-fives while others of us yearn for chill and quiet serenity with those we love

Whichever way you lean, remember that the first Christmas was filled with contingency, Mary's water breaking while riding a donkey, a failed room reservation, and all the anxiety of a first birth

They were stress filled moments before anyone could begin to hum Silent Night, Holy Night

As our Presiding Bishop, Sean Rowe, put it:

If you imagine yourself as a character in the Gospel Nativity readings, you'll soon realize that the first Christmas was not about staying home by a warm hearth with chestnuts roasting and stockings hanging. Everyone in these passages is on the move, mostly without warning and against their will. Joseph and Mary are summoned from Nazareth to Bethlehem for a census. Shepherds, at the behest of an angel, leave their sheep in the fields to see what all the fuss is about. And the three Magi...are just sitting there minding their own kingdoms when a star intrudes on their lives and leads them on an unplanned and uncomfortable trip far away from home.

...The Gospel reminds us that Jesus came both to experience all of the joy, uncertainty, and brokenness of our humanity, and to bring God's kingdom near. The birth of the Christ Child heralds a new reality in which the last shall be first, the hungry will be fed, and the stranger among us shall be welcomed as a beloved child of God.

Each Christmas, we bring another year of living to this holy mystery, and 2025 has been a wild year by any measure

Our individual and collective human stories —our triumphs and disappointments—take another lap around the manger

A wonderful medieval painting at the Cloisters captures this reality of the incarnation and human redemption

This painting depicts the annunciation story in which the embryonic Jesus slips down a shaft of light toward Mary, already carrying his cross—foreshadowing Luther's later connection between the wood of the manger and the wood of the cross

Amid the beauty and vulnerability of this night, let's thank God for the Son born of Mary, who comes to share our hopes and fears, who takes on every deprivation and pain we can imagine, yet who rises victorious to claim us as his own

In this spirit, indulge in a few remembrances of the 'perfect' Christmas past, even if you also inevitably relive a few not-so-fun memories of their imperfection

In the spirit of the Holy Family, pray for people today who are on the move, who have no room in the inn, who flee across borders in mortal fear of today's Mad King Herods

Make a child's day merry and bright, yet even as you protect that child, remember that you gently guide him or her into the mysteries of the adulthood that is no less chaotic than that of Jesus's own day

May we, in the communion of saints, be supported by the spirit of the manger, available to God's desire, God's will

May we tap into the courage of Mary, finding the wisdom to make her words our own: "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be to me – and to each one of us here tonight – according to your word."

In this spirit, I wish you a safe, joyous Christmas with those whom you love.