

Christmas Eve 2022

St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI

The Rev. Ian Burch

People who know me well will know that I'm a bookworm. I always have been. I remember my brother getting mad at me once because he bought White Sox tickets for us when I lived in Chicago, and I snuck a paperback into the game. I've been known to listen to audiobooks on a run or miss my stop on public transportation because I was nose-deep in a book. I'm still convinced that the public library is one of the greatest achievements of human civilization.

I read a mystery series a few years ago that I particularly liked. It had sort of the things that you'd expect: a scary villain, an intrepid detective, and a tangled plot. But it had a twist and a pretty delicious one at that. You see, the detective didn't chase the villain down dark alleys or country roads. Instead, the detective had to follow the villain through great works of British literature. So, the villain might be hiding at the Pemberley estate from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Or maybe a murder takes place on the streets of Dickens' smog-filled London. Or the detective might have to enter into Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* to find a clue and solve the crime.

It's an imaginative conceit. And having characters jump from famous book to famous book can really keep you on your toes and make you wish you had paid better attention in High School English class. And, even though it's just a literary device, I like the idea that a person could bodily enter a story and walk through its pages. I tend to think that the Christian life is entering story after story throughout the church year. We can smell the salt from the Red Sea when Moses hurries us across the dry land as we flee from Pharaoh's army. We can see the spittle on the edge of the prophet's mouths as they enter Jerusalem, calling the people to remember the covenant they swore at Sinai. And we can feel the heat when the flames come down from heaven and land on the disciples on the day of Pentecost.

And, of course, tonight, we receive one of the most holy invitations from the Church — to enter into the story of Jesus' birth. No other story has captured the imagination of Christians across space and time than the story of the Christchild born under a star in Bethlehem. And no other story has us retelling it every year, always finding new meaning and fresh purpose. Imagine being able to get even closer to the story. Imagine opening the covers of an old Bible and walking right in as if the Bible were less of a book and more of a door. What might you see? What might you smell? What might you taste?

I imagine you might see an exhausted young woman and her husband in the first few hours after they met their firstborn child. I imagine that you might hear the exclamations of the shepherds as well as the songs of the angels. And I believe — this is where faith comes in — that you might feel at that moment that the world is different because of the birth of this child. Our Christian

faith tells us that, no matter what came before or what might come after, God chose to become fully human at the first Christmas. While the other gods of the ancient near east rode across the sky in golden chariots or flung lightning from their mountaintops, our God partnered with a young woman of no family and no consequence to bridge heaven and earth with the miracle of birth. Our God appeared to the shepherds — itinerant and uneducated, of no status and of no importance in the great houses of Judah. And our God called to the Magi — wise men from the wrong religion and the wrong country. And yet, faithful to God in all their mysterious presence. And you get to watch all of that play out, as you stand in the middle of the greatest story ever told.

As you in the story, looking at the savior of the world crying to his mother in hunger, I wonder what it feels like to know that this child will grow and tell people to love our neighbor as ourselves, to turn the other cheek, to honor the meek and the peacemakers. This child will grow to preach against the unjust occupation of the Temple by the Roman army, to lash out at moneylenders who had set up shop in the synagogue, to break bread with every kind of low-life outcast that you can imagine or would want to—all to show us what love can look like, what God's love does look like.

But those stories are years away. Tonight, as you stand inside the pages of the Gospel, you see an exhausted family, grappling with the miracle of new birth.

Take some time tonight — between parties and presents and children — to contemplate the majesty of God come to earth at Christmas. Take a moment to enter the story with your whole body and soul. And kneel and adore the Christ child, the God that we worship tonight. Because God was born at Christmas, our lives are changed and the church is ready to follow our unlikely sovereign. The Christian can enter the story whenever she wants to, especially at Christmas. O Come Let Us Adore Him. Amen.