

Blessed Christmas. We have reached the holy night of the birth of our Savior. May God bless our understanding of the amazing grace that brings us this new birth and fill us with joy at his coming.

Being filled with joy sounds wonderful, doesn't it? But there's no "joy" button we can push to make it happen and just stepping into a church tonight doesn't make it happen either. Joy is a habit that comes with opening oneself up to receive the mystery of God's love. We can get a start on that tonight in the beauty of this place, among friends and family and the community that is St. Andrew's. We can get a start. Or a boost.

Unfortunately the reading we've heard from the book of Titus sets the bar impossibly high. "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all" – this much is the wonderful gift God gives us tonight – but then the author says, "training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly..."

If you have not yet renounced worldly passions, or if you have not reached upright and godly, don't rule yourself out. Perfection is not what our Lord seeks. Jesus seeks us as we are.

My husband's grandparents were born in Budapest. They met here, in the US, in their tender youth – Julia was in her teens when she came. She married John Dohanyos and they settled in a little coal-mining town in western Pennsylvania, where Papa worked in the mine. They were in America for most of their lives, but the Old World ways stayed deeply embedded.

Their house, for example, in Avella, PA. There was a big room in the front they called the parlor. The best things were in that room - stuffed furniture that looked like new, fine painted china figurines, polished religiously, lovely embroidered sofa pillows with the look of Hungary, pictures of home and family.

Everything was protected by plastic covers because of the coal dust. The gleaming, clean windows could not be opened for the same reason.

This room waited for the occasional guest. But life went on in the kitchen. Out there, in the back of the house, the family gathered and shared news, ate their meals at the modest kitchen table by the coal stove, read the paper, and listened to the radio.

Out there was talk of politics and of God and of troubles at work, of weddings and births, and of deaths. Out there feelings were expressed - feelings of love and of pain, of frustration and failure, and of joy.

Out there was the cuckoo clock that sometimes exposed Julia as she sat listening on the party line. "Cuckoo, cuckoo." There would be silence on the line, then, "Julia, is that you?"

Out in that kitchen arguments took place and people were sometimes forgiven, sometimes not. The parlor displayed the best but out in the kitchen is where life was lived.

The question for us this night as we contemplate opening ourselves to receive the Son of God, born for us this night, the question is, “will we invite him into the parlor or the kitchen?” Will we receive him into the carefully-preserved front room of our selves, where we keep our best, protected by plastic from the coal dust of the world, or will we receive him this time into the kitchen, where we really live?

God knows what’s going on in the kitchen. Our creator knows our upsets and disappointments, our failures, our shortcomings, our separation from God.

The birth of God’s son was into real life. And it was a difficult time. It was a difficult time for Mary, the mother of Jesus, and her husband, Joseph. The peaceful Christmas card picture of the sleeping baby surrounded by awe-struck animals and adoring parents makes us forget that.

But Jesus’ earthly parents lived under a government that made pregnant women travel miles on a donkey’s back in order to be counted in a census; she with child so soon, and before their marriage was consummated, and the two of them still together by faith, faith in the announcement of an angel that all would be well;

arriving in a strange town without food or the hope of lodging; being turned away again and again – there was no room in the inn – even though the baby was ready to be born and babies don’t wait; and then bearing the child alone, the two of them, in a drafty stable among the animals and wrapping him in rags found in the barn, making a bed for him in a manger-full of hay, put out not for him but as food for the cows.

It’s easy for us to forget that Jesus was born a homeless person, an outcast, vulnerable and weak, protected by the determination of his earthly father, the love of his blessed mother, and the purpose of God Almighty.

God’s purpose, incredible as it seems to us, was and is to empty God’s self into humanity. Jesus did not become human like us just as a lark, to see what it was like, and then quickly to return to his throne of power as one with the creator and ruler of the universe. Jesus became human for the long haul and whatever the cost.

He became human out of love for us and a desire for us to come closer to God. He became human in the most vulnerable way possible so that we might not be afraid to be vulnerable and weak, too.

Jesus’ purpose was and is to empty himself into humanity. He knows our reluctance to become vulnerable by opening ourselves, and he knows our fear of rejection. But he knows, too, first hand, what rejection is. The God who lived among us will not reject us.

Holy Scripture requires godliness and upright living from us, expects us to renounce worldly passions. And the habit of faith teaches us to do those things. But tonight we are just at the beginning. This is the night of new birth, new life.

Our God does not look for perfection in us, but only for an invitation into the place where we really live. Thanks be to God.

Soli Deo Gloria