Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O God, my rock and my redeemer.

Many, many year ago, before I was married, I observed an annual tradition of taking a fishing trip with my buddies to the Eastern side of the Sierra, to a place called the Arcularius Ranch on the Owens River. The place we went was an old cattle ranch where we could rent a ramshackle cowhand cabin for the week. Our one-room cabin was richly appointed with metal bunk beds, a rickety table and an old wood stove. For twenty-something single guys, this was heaven on earth. By day, we fished every bend and riffle of the Owens River on the ranch. Each evening we feasted on our catch.

One night, after a full day of fishing and an amazing meal, I went outside into the brisk desert night and went for a walk down the gravel road leading to the river. To this day, I can still see the sky of that night as vividly as if it were tonight. The stars glistened, and the Milky Way stretched from one horizon to the other.

As I kept walking, the rocks and mountains and sagebrush around me shimmered in a bluish sheen. The road I walked seemed to lead right up into the night sky. I could touch the entire universe with my fingertips.

In that moment, I knew to the depths of my being, that there is something beyond myself, something beyond the narrowness of my small, troubled, worried world – something vast and infinite and wonderful surrounding me, embracing me, filling me with life and love, and blessing me with indescribable holiness.

On that holy night, long ago, in the desert, in the starlight, I knew that I would never be the same again.

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Long, long ago, the prophet Isaiah foretold the holiest of holy nights:
“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.”

On this holiest of holy nights, shepherds stood on a rocky, barren hillside, staring into the sky.

What did they see, what did they hear on this holy night? What did they think about? What did they worry about?

Their lot in life was harsh, their work hard. Shepherds are of a very low social class.

The respectable people do not care to be around them. Shepherds work with sheep, they smell of filth, and live in caves.

These particular shepherds have the night watch, and that makes them the lowest of the low.

On this holiest of holy night, long, long ago, the angels come to these shepherds and tell them something astounding is unfolding:

A baby born this night.

The angels tell the shepherds that this baby is the One they seek, the Messiah, the Holy One of God: The Christ.

“How can this be?” the shepherds wonder.

When the shepherds hear of this birth, they are terrified. Why wouldn’t they be?

“We are but lowly shepherds,” they tell the angels. “Why are you telling us this?”

“You should be telling the king and his court, and all the important, powerful people. Why us? We are but lowly shepherds, living in caves.”

So, the angels tell these shepherds something more astounding: “This baby is near you, right over here in a stable. Go see.”

“Here?” the shepherds ask. “You want us to go see? This is not like anything we’ve been taught about how the Messiah will come.”

Everything is about to be turned upside down for these shepherds on this holy night.

The Messiah, the Holy One of God – The Christ – is born not into wealth, not into political power, not into social status.

This Messiah is born to Jewish peasants in a stable because they have nowhere else to go.

The mother is barely a teenager; we know her as Mary. She was supposed have had an arranged marriage with a man named Joseph, but she became pregnant – and out of wedlock, and not by him.

Joseph stuck by Mary when he didn’t have to.
Under the law of the time, Joseph could have had her stoned to death, but instead the two flee their hometown of Nazareth to the rocky hills of Bethlehem.

The gospel writer Luke paints this picture with a polite sheen by saying Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem to register for a census – except that historians tell us they can find no such census.

Mary and Joseph most likely fled for their lives, escaping persecution from their village.

When they arrive in Bethlehem, they have nowhere to sleep; either they have no relatives in Bethlehem or none will take them in.

And, so this baby is born in hiding, in a stable – in just about as low a place as anyone could go.

This baby, like so many tens of millions of babies, then and now, enters life in obscurity and poverty – on the very margins of human existence.

The survival of this baby, like tens of millions of other babies then and now, is not so certain at first. That this baby survives his first night is a miracle.

Then the angels start showing up.
But the angels don’t go to kings or aristocrats or powerful people.

No, the angels go to the shepherds, the lowly shepherds, who live in caves, standing the night watch.

These shepherds muster all the courage have, and they do as the angels tell them. They go look for themselves.

And then they understand.

They find not a brutal ruler, but a gentle healer who will lead a life of simplicity, prayer and truth.

They find not a warrior with a sword but the Prince of Peace who will teach the way of love, forgiveness, generosity and sacrifice for a cause greater than self.

For these shepherds, life will never be the same again for them – and life will never be the same again for us.

The reactions will always be like this with Jesus. Expectations will always be turned upside down.

The last shall go first, the lowly brought high, the greedy and powerful cast down, enemies forgiven, the meek inheriting the earth, the peacemakers blessed.

Jesus, the Christ, the Holy One of God – this messiah is different than anyone the world expects.
Jesus, the Christ, the Holy One of God, comes to free us from whatever caves we dwell in; free us from our lowest moments; and free us from the deepest poverty of our souls.

Jesus, the Christ, the Holy One of God, brings unconditional love to the sick, the prisoners, the poor and outcasts, the lonely and wounded. He brings unconditional love to us, no strings attached. His healing will last beyond this small, troubled, worried world, and last beyond our frail mortal bodies.

What better way for God to bring us this Good News of great joy this night than by coming to us as a helpless baby, born in the lowest estate a human being can be born?

The story of Jesus – his birth, his life, and his death on the Cross and the Resurrection beyond – this great story begins once again tonight.

Those who first encounter Jesus continue to write this story in the way they live. Their story is our story.

We continue to write this story in how we live, and our life will never be the same again.

The angels still declare God's boundless love in the starry night, in the carols we sing, in the glow of candles, in the love we share with each other every day of our lives, even in the midst of our sorrows.

Tonight, we give thanks for all that we have been given, for those we love, and especially for this gift of God’s Son who walks with us the daylight and in the night.

Tonight, we touch the stars.

Tonight, we are touched by something vast and infinite and wonderful surrounding us, embracing us, filling us with life and love, and blessing us with indescribable holiness.

May this holy night bring you many blessings the days ahead, and may the light of Jesus, the Christ, the Holy One of God, shine within you always. AMEN.