Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright... We pray this will be true this night. Amen.

We gather tonight, as our ancestors gathered in ages past, to celebrate the birth of the Holy One of God, the Anointed One – the Christ – the Son of God, Emmanuel, the Incarnate Word Made Flesh — the Prince of Peace.

These are just a few of the words we use for describing the importance of this event we call Christmas.

The story of the birth of Jesus has been told over and over for so many centuries that it can seem buried under layers and layers of words.

But on this first Christmas night, there was only a baby, and his parents looking for shelter wherever they could find it.

The words and the meaning would come much later.

A few years ago, Lori and I went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land with Canon Anne Arthur. We hoped that by touching the ground where Jesus walked, we could peel away a few layers of words, and hear the story of Jesus with new ears.

Among our stops was Bethlehem, where two of the gospels tell us Jesus was born. As you might imagine, Christmas is year-round industry in Bethlehem.

There are shrines everywhere in Bethlehem to every imaginable holy moment in the birth of Jesus. There are even the ruins of the ancient “Church of the Holy Spasm” where it said that Mary experienced her first labor pain.

In the heart of Bethlehem, atop a hill, there is a massive stone medieval church, built atop the ruins of a massive Byzantine church, which is built on top of the spot where legend has it that Jesus was born in a cave.

Candles are everywhere inside this huge church, and Christmas ornaments hang year-round from the rafters. Perhaps unwisely, we went in the summer — and it was especially stifling hot inside the church.

We stood in a long line that wound its way through the church.

The objective of this line is a stairwell leading to the basement where a metal star on the floor marks the exact spot where it is said that Jesus was born.

After what felt like an eternity, Lori could bear stifling heat no longer and she stepped outside for a little fresh air.

I stayed in the line and made it to the basement, and yes. there is a metal star on the floor that is underneath a glass window.
I checked that off.
Candidly, it is hard to catch the spirit of Christmas inside this church built atop other churches atop a metal star in the basement.
To feel Christmas, we had to go elsewhere.
On the outskirts of Bethlehem, on a hillside, are the fields where the shepherds saw the angels in the middle of the night.
The fields are still open, the air clear, and in the distance, you can see the skyline of Jerusalem, though there is now a wall separating Palestinian Bethlehem from the Holy City.
In ancient times, shepherds were the lowliest of the low in the Middle Eastern caste system. They lived with sheep. Sheep smell. No one wants to be around shepherds.
And these shepherds are even lower than that. They have the night watch. And, worse, they live in caves. They are the lowest of the low. Why? Caves are where people go to hide. Caves are where people are buried.
It doesn’t get much lower than to be a shepherd, on the night watch, living in a cave.
The hillside where the shepherds lived is still riddled with caves, and you can still go inside and crawl around, and so we did.
And that is when I got it about the shepherds and Christmas.
On this first Christmas night the angels come to the shepherds – the lowest of the low – and tell them something extraordinary is happening:
The birth of a baby who brings hope, strength, courage, and healing that will last into eternity.
As I stood inside a cave, I realized it was no accident the angels brought this news first to the shepherds, the ones who live in caves. This messiah is for them.
But at first, these shepherds are confused and afraid. They wonder, how can this be?
“We are but shepherds living in caves. This is very different than anything we have been taught by every master we’ve ever had.”
The angel tells them to go see for themselves — and so they do.
They find this baby lying in a hay trough; his parents are homeless, and they have nowhere to stay but maybe in one of the caves.
And then the lowliest of the low understand everything:
This messiah is for everyone who has ever felt low, or alone, or misunderstood or trapped in a cave by circumstances beyond their control. This messiah is for every one of us.
This child will be named Jesus, he will grow and his only possessions will be the clothes on his back and his healing hands.

Sometimes he will have no roof over his head, and at other times he will be invited into the homes of the wealthy. He will go everywhere he is invited, and sometimes invite himself.

He will teach people, he will heal people, feed them, and he will cry with them.

But Jesus will also startle people. He will up-end the money-changing tables at the Temple, and he will up-end the social conventions of status and political power.

Sometimes he will lecture and scold his followers.

Over and over, Jesus tells his followers: Care for the poor, visit the prisoners, feed the hungry, pray for your enemies, love your enemies — and do even more than that.

Care for each other. Forgive each other especially when it is hardest of all to forgive.

His followers will struggle to understand him but his imprint on their soul will last into eternity.

In time, this Holy One of God will go to the Cross to defeat the power of death and evil, and will rise again. He will be experienced over and over by his followers.

In our time, we will experience him over and over. We, too, will struggle to understand him, and his imprint on our souls will last into eternity.

He never promises life will be easy or simple or fair. He never promises following him will be easy or simple.

We live in challenging and bewildering times. Many issues confront us, from climate change to an explosion of homelessness on our streets.

Politics in Washington is as toxic as it has ever been in our lifetime, and political opinions are sharply divided, even among us.

Many of us — many of you — are facing personal issues — jobs, family, relationships, health.

What is Jesus trying to tell us now, on this Christmas night?

I think he is telling us this:

Breathe. Breathe.

Find fresh air. Step away from the stifling places.

Breathe. Pray. Pray. Ease up on yourself. Never forget who you are and whose you are. Never forget why we are here.

And then act in whatever way you can act to change this world. Err on the side grace. Err on the side of mercy and justice. Err on the side of love.
Care for the poor, the hurting, the sick, the wounded, the captives. Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God.
Find the islands of peace in your life, and build islands of peace around you, and build islands of peace wherever you go.
Cherish each other this holy night and always.
Listen for the faith inside you – the faith that has been inside you from the moment of your birth.
Listen to the silent night. Listen.

*Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright...Jesus Lord at thy birth.*”