“Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart (Lk 2.15-19).

What drew you here, this evening, to this Bethlehem? What “thing” were you hoping to see “that has taken place”? [I mean, something drew you away from watching the end of the Broncos/Raiders game!] Perhaps it’s your first Christmas Eve service, and you’re curious. Perhaps you’re here with family — it’s a tradition. Perhaps it’s because you really like Christmas music. Perhaps it’s a desire to experience awe or mystery. Perhaps it’s just something you do — to experience anew the Source of the “good news of great joy for all the people: [the child who] was born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” Whatever the reason, we’re glad you’re here to celebrate with us the great gift of the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ.

I vividly remember my first Christmas Eve service. Since my family regularly celebrated with a big dinner and gift-opening on Christmas Eve, we didn’t attend services the “Night Before Christmas”. But, after I’d gotten my driver’s license, I had a bit more flexibility than before. It wasn’t until I was in college, however, that I saw the notice for a midnight Christmas Eve service at Mt. Tabor Presbyterian Church in Portland, Oregon. I can’t remember quite why I wanted to attend; maybe someone had mentioned how beautiful such services could be. Deep down inside, however, I suppose that I was looking for something.

Mt. Tabor Pres wasn’t in my neighborhood; I had to drive about a half-hour to get there. I recall the drive through the neighborhoods, and all of the Christmas lights. I remember the interior of the church — decorated much like we are — lots of poinsettias, both red and white, the creche, the candles. And I remember the music — the choir, the organ (both much larger and accomplished than my regular experiences). And, then . . . the bells! I’d never heard a bell choir before. It
was magical — the whole evening was magical. As I drove home, I found myself, like Mary, “pondering these things in my heart” (Lk 2.19). I wondered if I’d seen the Christ anew.

That, indeed, may have been the case. Or, at the least, it was a step along the way to my expanded understanding of the miracle of God-becoming-human. Certainly, this evening we celebrate a singular event — the birth of Jesus, divinity incarnate. But I’ve come to realize that Christ comes to us all the time, and in many ways, including amazing organ music or bell choirs . . . perhaps even in sermons. Indeed, Christ becomes present more often than we imagine, I think.

Christ’s — the Messiah’s — mysterious presence and impact, is imagined provocatively in the parable “The Rabbi’s Gift” (related most memorably, I think, by M. Scott Peck). As it is told, there was an old monastery which, over the centuries and for various reasons, had been in serious decline; only five monks remained, including the Abbott. The building was beginning to decay. The mood was pretty dim.

Nearby, in the woods, there was a little hut to which an old Rabbi would come occasionally for personal retreats. Once, when he was in residence, the monks thought that the Abbott might be able to get some advice from the Rabbi about how to save the monastery. So the Abbott paid him a visit, and explained the situation. The Rabbi responded sadly that his synagogue was experiencing the same sort of decline. So, they studied scripture together, and wept over their shared situations. When the Abbott left, the Rabbi said: “I don’t really have any advice. I can only tell you that the Messiah is one of you.”

When the Abbott returned to his monastery, he told the brothers, “The Rabbi had no advice, but said something I don’t quite understand: ‘The Messiah is one of us.’” Imagine the disappointment and consternation of the brothers! But, imagine, too, the questions that all of a sudden arose for them. “Maybe it’s the Abbott; he’s the Messiah? He’s been such a steady leader for years.” “Is it brother Thomas — he’s a man of light!” “It wouldn’t be brother Elred; he’s such a thorn in peoples’ sides . . . but . . . he’s almost always right.” “What about brother Philip? He always shows up at the right time, just when you need him.” And, “Oh, God, it couldn’t be me?”

As all of the monks pondered these questions in their hearts, they began treating each more respectfully — as if their brothers WERE the Messiah. I mean, you wouldn’t want to mistreat the Messiah! And as their behavior towards one another changed, the locals began to notice. And they showed up at the monastery
to picnic, to ask for spiritual advice, to pray. And some of the younger men decided that perhaps they might join the order. And, then, more and more. And, soon the monastery thrived again.

Tonight we have all come to Bethlehem, to see this thing that has taken place. For many of us, it is an annual pilgrimage, for others, again, it’s the first time. We have come from near and far, from law offices, from department stores, from schools, from our homes — we have left our “sheep”, our “fields”, to come and see. We have come, with all of our various concerns, troubles and hopes to see the Savior, who is Christ the Lord. I hope we indeed have that vision.

But, as we leave this place, and look at each other — might he, might she, be the Messiah, too? Or, when we look in the mirror before bed, ponder in our hearts . . . . What might this vision mean? Might it just mean that, with renewed respect for others as well as ourselves, our various “monasteries” — our family, our church, our country, our world — can thrive?

O holy Child of Bethlehem!
   Descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin and enter in,
   Be born in us to-day.
We hear the Christmas angels
   The great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us,
   Our Lord Emmanuel.

Amen.