One of the challenges of preaching on Christmas Eve is finding something new and original to say in describing what Christmas is all about. For by now all of us have watched enough Hallmark Christmas specials to know that Christmas is about leaving your high stress corporate job in Manhattan to go back to small-town Ohio to help your recently widowed father get the house ready for sale and falling in love with the well coiffed handyman who has a heart of gold, all to realize that the true meaning of Christmas was here all along, or something like that. So as challenging as being original is, I think the greater challenge is to try and to sum up into words what has actually happened.  Trinity Sunday is traditionally the Sunday where clergy stand up and say that they really can’t describe the thing for which the Sunday is named. On that day we are happy to admit we don’t understand the Trinity, but the nativity, that is Christmas Eve seems like it should be pretty straightforward – Jesus is born and some angels tell some shepherds who pop on over for a visit and a good time is had by all.  That is true but it’s kind of like describing the German invasion of France as some Wehrmacht guys went for a walk through Belgium and craziest thing they wound up in Paris goose-stepping through the Arc de Triomphe. There is nothing technically wrong with the details but it does not grapple with the enormity of the events. Certainly all sorts of people have tried their hand in describing God becoming man and dwelling among us but in may ways it’s sort of like Schrodinger’s cat; the explanation does not necessarily clear everything up. But for a moment, let’s look at some of the explanations and see just how close they get us.

In John Donne’s poem *Nativity* he explained it like this.  “Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb, Now leaves His well-belov’d imprisonment.”  It’s certainly better than I could put it, I mean he’s John Donne after all, but it still does not seem like it captures everything.  Immensity does a lot of heavy lifting in this poem and for a word that is often employed to describe a slice of cheesecake it does seem to be a bit of a tall order. The Prophet Isaiah says, “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.”  Again better than I could have done, but like Donne it relies on poetical devices, we have light contrasted with dark to show what happens on this night. And I like poetical devices as much or probably more than the next guy but we do have to admit that they have a tendency to talk around the subject a bit.  Now Luke, who can always be counted on for straightforward and clear writing says, “To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”  Not much poetry, just pretty much the facts, but the facts miss the immensity that comes in Donne’s description and the metaphorical light of Isaiah.  We could try and shoehorn all of this together to come up with a description by committee, but that would probably end up looking like the Ford Edsel and we all know how that worked out (if you don’t the quick version is that it was an unbridled disaster).

 The problem with any of these descriptions whether metaphorical or not is that they try to sum up God becoming man in a few words, but the problem may go deeper then that.  The problem may simply be that we are trying to use words at all to describe God. And while I realize that this might be all we have, we must be willing to acknowledge that it is going to fall short.

 Donne uses the word immensity, Isaiah the word light and Luke uses the term Messiah.  Again none are wrong, but just think for a moment what we trying to do. We are trying to understand how the God of the universe came to us a small child while, if you want a good theological word, maintains the hypostatic union wherein he was both fully God and fully man. It is hard enough for us to try and understand God, but God lying in a manger.  The God of the universe, the one through whom all things came into being lying around as one of the most helpless things that exists, a human child.  I mean your standard horse can walk within an hour of its birth, which means humans, on average, start walking 364 days after Mr. Ed.  And so how can we hold these two images in unity.  How can we say the one who has always existed, our creator and our sustainer is also this helpless creature lying in a smelly manger?

The Hungarian polymath Michael Polanyi, once famously said, “We know more than we can tell.”  This points out that we may comprehend things but when we set out to explain them we fall short, the words just simply are not there.  This is, I think, why there is poetry, music and art in general.  Art in some ways tries to open a wormhole between us and God by using other means to convey this thing that we know but cannot put into words.  Similarly I think this is why there are so many trappings that go along with the Christmas season that, strictly speaking, are not about Christmas at all.  A talking snowman, a decorated tree, songs about being home for Christmas are not theological definitions of the incarnation, but they may help us see some of the wonder, beauty and joy that we feel, but cannot put into words.  They may all be attempts at helping us comprehend the incomprehensible.

 Think back on a wonderful teacher that you had when you were growing up. My guess is that one of the traits this teacher had was the ability to explain things in different ways. If you could not grasp a concept in one way they would circle back and approach it from a different angle until you were able to see what the whole thing was all about. This is the same thing that we have tonight. Yes, God became flesh and dwelt among us. Yes, the light shone in the darkness, yes the angels sing, “Glory to the newborn King.” Yes, it is the most magical night of the year as the Christmas specials tell us. Yes, the Grinch’s small heart grew three sizes this day and yes, the wonder and excitement you felt as a child about Christmas day are all ways we begin to understand what happened this night. They all point to something that is beyond our power to comprehend yet something we know is wonderful nonetheless.

 I know that it is trendy in certain circles to poo-poo secular Christmas and I have been one among those at various times and places. And yes some of it is simply ridiculous and some even blasphemous, but at its best it points to the fact that something immense happened, something that is beyond what we can really explain. And in heaping up all sorts of adornments and coming at it from so many different angles we are trying to grasp how the one whom through all things came into being became a helpless child in a stable in a backwater of the Roman Empire.

 And so as we go out this night, be filled with joy, be filled with peace and goodwill towards men, because tonight changed everything. It may not make complete sense but that is often how love is. And tonight ultimately is about love. It is about God so loving us that he sent his Son to save us by becoming flesh and dwelling among us. And so we do not fully comprehend, but we know it is something big, even something enormous – God became man so that we may be his both now and forevermore.