As I get older, I become more and more aware of the inadequacy of words. What I mean by this is that there are things, I feel and even things I understand which I cannot adequately explain. I was an English major so this does not mean that I am giving up on the English language and switching to Esperanto, nor does it mean that I do not appreciate the beauty and brilliance of much of the literary world. It is simply that I do not believe everything which exists can adequately be put into words. I think this reticence or hesitation may have been with me my whole life but it has simply become more apparent. While not articulated at the time, I think it is one of the reasons I left the Presbyterian Church and became Episcopalian. I say this because the Presbyterian Church was very word driven. Sermons were long and the beauty of holiness that one experiences in an Episcopal service was often neglected. There was no liturgy nor was there weekly Eucharist. And so, the worship seemed incomplete. The Presbyterians were trying to convey a truth about God but did not have adequate means by which to do so because they had jettisoned so many of the tools by which Christian worship had come to understand as necessary. In the services of my youth, I did not come face to face with the sacred mysteries on a regular basis. I bring this up today not to deal with some unresolved issues from my childhood but because it is Christmas and if there was ever an event which acknowledged the inadequacy of words, I think this might be it. But before I proceed let me acknowledge that it might take a minute for me to get to my point.

So let’s go. If you look at the history of humanity as we are given in the Bible, it is a story of humanity’s rebellion against God juxtaposed with God trying to bring His people back. In all of God’s attempts it never worked, but He continued trying and the means by which he tended to try to get people back on track, at least in the latter parts of the Old Testament, was by sending prophets. And the main instrument the prophets used to accomplish this task was words. They would tell the people what they were doing wrong and what they needed to do so as to not be wrong. If you look at the Old Testament, close to a third of it is occupied by prophets telling people to repent and return to the Lord, which is generally followed by people not repenting and not returning to the Lord. The New Testament opens with another prophet, John the Baptist who continues this tradition. Although he does add a slight twist by baptizing after people have repented. But the issue is the words never quite got things right. And so something new happened on Christmas Day and what happened is what we read in our Gospel lesson today. “The word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Something different was needed because all the words floating in the ether simply did not convey what it was that God wanted from us and what it was that God would do for us. It was only in the incarnation that it all started to become clear; not in the sense that we can fully explain what happened but in the sense that Jesus was here, that God had stooped to become man. We needed an incarnation; we needed something physical to finally start seeing what it was that God has called us to be because what had come before simply could not accomplish that. Jesus being born in a manger in Bethlehem expressed God’s hopes for humanity in something beyond words because that is what love does. For to my mind the best thing we can say about Christmas in terms of words is that love happened and continues to happen.

We have been trying to express in words for two thousand years what it meant and what it was and still have not done so perfectly or probably even adequately. When being charitable I think that so much of the additions we have at Christmas – the trees, the decorations, the music, the traditions and so on are all ways we are fumbling to express and understand what it is that happened. We try to get at something of the magnitude of Christmas by using things that are not words. And so, as I stand here on Christmas Day, I know I cannot tell you exactly how it worked and how it will work. Sure, we know a child was born in a manger, we know that child was God incarnate but that is not enough to explain it. It goes beyond what our language can handle, which sort of makes sense. For how can we corral God with words? Often when people reject God, they will tell you something like they have never seen any evidence of God like they were an ornithologist looking for an elusive Congo Bay Owl. But God is not something we can isolate and analyze rather God is existence itself. Before there was a world there was God. He is not a part of it but is rather the one through whom it came to be. And that is what we are trying to wrap our heads around on Christmas. How the one who is not part of existence but is existence itself came to us as a small child in a backwater town of the Roman Empire. And so, we grasp and try but ultimately, we will just have to know -- know that this happened because of love. Let me end with a poem from the great Christina Rosetti. You may have heard it; you may have even sung it.

Love came down at Christmas,

Love all lovely, love divine;

Love was born at Christmas,

Star and angels gave the sign.

Worship we the Godhead,

Love incarnate, love divine;

Worship we our Jesus:

But wherewith for sacred sign?

Love shall be our token,

Love shall be yours and love be mine,

Love to God and to all men,

Love for plea and gift and sign.