Jesus came to earth very quietly, in a cave, with his mother and foster father as the only humans in attendance. He didn’t push his way into our lives, like the emperors of that time who loudly touted their own greatness and demanded allegiance. Rather, Jesus, the King of Kings, approached gently, giving those he encountered a choice of whether to open their lives to the transformation that He offered. He approaches still gently today, inviting us to choose to be part of His work in the world.

 Mary and Joseph both had choices of whether to accept their ministries as the mother and foster father of Jesus. Although this may not have been what they would have chosen to do with their lives if they had retained complete control, they yielded their lives to what God wanted from them. Are we, like the Holy Parents, willing to undertake hard ministries, ones that may be inconvenient, or different from what we’ve planned for our lives?

Mary and Joseph also had a choice about whether Mary would travel to Bethlehem, about a 90-mile journey from their home in Nazareth. That journey, this late in her pregnancy, whether by foot as some commentators note, or by donkey, as tradition has held, would have been arduous. Joseph, as head of household and a direct descendent of King David, was required by the emperor’s edict to go to Bethlehem, the city of David, but Mary was not. Perhaps Mary made the journey because of Joseph’s desire to protect Mary from needing to give birth without his support in a village where her pregnancy had created a scandal. A likely factor in the decision, also, however, was that they knew that generations of prophets had foretold the birth of the Savior in Bethlehem. As very pious Jews they would have discerned that God was using the secular emperor’s decree as a way to create conditions for fulfillment of that prophecy. Jesus could have saved us no matter where he had been born, but the birth in Bethlehem was God’s graciousness to that generation and to us, so that we could see the fulfillment in prophecy and believe. Mary and Joseph chose to participate in that grace – they decided that Mary should make that journey -- knowing that Jesus would likely be born while they were there. Are we willing to undertake difficult journeys in life so that others can know for sure that Jesus is really the Son of God, the Promised One, the Way, the Truth and the Life?

The innkeeper had a choice about how to respond to this gentle baby king, as well. Traditionally, we’ve envisioned the holy couple going from inn to inn, finding a no vacancy sign or an innkeeper who wasn’t willing to find room for the child. Perhaps that is true. Modern scholars suggest, however, that in Middle Eastern inns of the time, middle class people like Mary and Joseph often slept communally in one big room. While there may have technically been a space for the Holy Couple, there would have been no “room” -- no privacy for giving birth or no way to give birth while still allowing others to sleep. Thus, a kind innkeeper may have offered his cave. Whichever is true, the innkeeper also had a choice of how to respond to the impending coming of our Lord. Do we turn Jesus away, like the traditional innkeeper, or are we more like the modern one, finding ways in which God’s will can be fulfilled in our lives, in this congregation and in the community?

Whether or not the Angel of the Lord had free will to choose not to announce the birth to the shepherds is a source of theological debate. Even if he did not, I believe the heavenly host had a choice of whether to join him in worship and praise. This Gloria is the only “loudness” in the nativity story. I think this chorus of praise comes because the angel’s hearts were so full of joy at the love God has shown to humanity in becoming flesh and living among us. The angels allowed themselves to be caught up in the joy that comes from knowing that God had brought peace, reconciliation and salvation to humanity. Once the angels opened themselves up to that joy, their praise just bubbled over. Are we like those angels, willing to let ourselves become so full of praise for what God has done for us and for others (including our worst enemy) that our joy cannot be contained?

 The shepherds also had a choice of how to respond to this loud chorus. They could have told the angels to be quiet so as not to disturb the pastoral setting or to scare the sheep. They could have decided they had imagined the whole thing. They could have ignored it or put off coming to check it out until they could find someone to watch their sheep. Instead, however, the shepherds came immediately – with haste – to worship Jesus. They worshipped Jesus through their willingness to drop what they were doing to have a sacred encounter with Christ, to praise Him and to tell others about Him. Are we willing to leave whatever we are doing to bow at the feet of Jesus? Once renewed by that close encounter with the living God, are we willing to tell others about Him?

Finally, the Gospel tells us one more way in which Mary chose to respond to the coming of the Christ Child. She watched and heard everything that happened, knowing God was in control. This was Mary’s approach throughout the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. She saw all that God was doing in the world, meditated on it and engraved it in her heart. How much of what we see and hear of God’s work in the world, do we meditate on, and make a part of our hearts? .

On that holy night in Bethlehem, the Son of God came silently, gently inviting others to receive Him and to join in His work. On this holy night, Jesus comes again, gently inviting Himself into more and more of our hearts, gently inviting us to be transformed and to be part of His ministry of reconciliation on earth. Tonight, tomorrow and every day of our lives, let us choose to live in ways that proclaim Jesus as Lord at His birth.

Amen