

Christmas Eve
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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I've been going to a new gym lately, and, bizarrely, it's the same gym where a bunch of speed skaters are preparing for the Olympic Trials being held in Milwaukee in January. So, at any given time, it could be middle-aged me and about five Olympic hopeful speed skaters, which is a new experience for me. Speed skaters have legs like beer kegs, and I've noticed that most of the available exercises have to do with lifting a great deal of weight with one's legs. Some of their exercises are rubbing off on me, and I've been doing a lot of lunges and whatnot. Last Wednesday, during our midweek Eucharist, I knelt for the confession like I usually do, and I couldn't help but notice that my legs were a lot stronger. It was easy to kneel and then to stand up again. So, thanks for all the squats, speed skaters.

I never intended to go to the gym so that it'd be easier to kneel in church, but sometimes unintended consequences are delightful. A lot of Christians have lost kneeling from their liturgical vocabulary, but I'm glad that we've retained it in the Episcopal church. I know that not all bodies are designed for kneeling, and I appreciate that for some people, it can be an uncomfortable idea—that God is somehow way up there, and I am a miserable wreck down here on my knees. This idea is augmented when we kneel mainly during a confession or when the priest is speaking the words of institution over the bread and the wine.

As I get older, I don't see kneeling as the profound act of contrition that I did when I was younger. Maybe life seems more complicated than it used to, and I'm not as quick to paint the entire human race in broad strokes as miserable sinners. Instead, I understand kneeling as a response to the majesty of God. When confronted with the sublime presence of the divine, it seems that kneeling is a perfectly rational choice. It's not that God is good and I am bad. It's that God is God, and I am me.

If you look at nativity sets—perhaps the big plastic ones in yards or the smaller, intimate sets in your homes—the people who come to Jesus kneel down in front of the manger. Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and the wise men kneel in front of the Holy Child.

It's such a commonplace sight for us to see the creche or to see characters in the stable kneeling down in reverence that it may have lost some of its impact. Imagine for a moment that you'd never seen that tableau before. Imagine that you see shepherds, peasants, kings, and a new mom and dad, kneeling down in worship of a little baby crying in a feeding trough. It's a bizarre image by just about any measure. Why on earth did these people from all walks of life find themselves bending their knees in a barn two thousand years ago?

The answer, of course, is that they knew something that we also know—that God chose to come to earth to be among us in a special way. The God of thunder, and fire, and deliverance became one of us and lived with us. Immanuel. God with us. And the very first witnesses to the coming

of Jesus to this earth sensed that the world would never be the same because of this baby. And so they knelt.

This is the same child who will teach the priests in the temple when he is just a little boy. This is the same child who will grow and say, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God." The same child who will break bread with outcasts and strangers, preaching about God's vision for how the earth should be. This little baby will teach us how to love one another and will embody God's infinite love for all of creation. And that, to me, seems like a pretty good reason to kneel.

Our world could use some more awe. Humans evince a certain arrogance when we're out of sync with God. We can begin to really believe that we are the masters of this planet and of our own fortunes. When I look around and see arctic ice melting and wars with no end in sight, it does not seem clear to me that we are the masters of anything. When human anxiety and fear sound so loudly in our ears, maybe we think that the world should kneel to us? Maybe we think we are the true masters, the true royalty.

This is untrue. True gods will not be found in the mighty halls of power in the world. True gods will not be found in bank vaults or in missile silos. The true God will always be found in the least, in the humble, in the most vulnerable.

On this holy night, we recognize that something special happened at Bethlehem two thousand years ago, and it continues to happen all over the world. God chooses to dwell with us in the person of Jesus, born to free us from all the chains we lock around each other.

That kind of love is hard to receive. That kind of love is hard to imagine. God's love evokes awe, and, with Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and wise men, we kneel before the love born on Christmas Day.

Come, let us adore Him. Amen.