CENTER VALLEY – Christmas time is here. After a seemingly interminable shopping season, the day has finally arrived for the exchange of gifts and glad tidings, all in celebration of a child’s birth.

What child is this is who grabs the world’s attention today, just as he has every year for more than two millennia hence? The news of his unexpected birth comes not by way of email or instant messaging, no press conference, televised coverage, not even a blog. No, the ethereal event that took place on that silent night was harkened by the song of angels heard on high.

Upon that midnight clear, the history of the world was changed forever. It happened once in royal David’s city, where political conflict still today bears witness to the ineptitude with which we humans fail to get along. It happens again and again with a promise for those who see and believe.

That promise is a global gift. Not everywhere will this Christmas be white with snow, but every one of us shares the dream of being blanketed by that color’s climate of peace. To fulfill this universal dream, we must wander again to the scene of that first noël and wonder anew about what it portends for us today. For the joy this day gives to the world will become a lasting reality only when we are able to appreciate the primacy of the person and the fullness of humanity that this day reveals.

The scene was ordinary, yet, like so much of the world still, one stricken by poverty. There were no red-nosed deer, only sheep and oxen and other animals. There the
Creator came to dwell, one with the simplest of creatures. No high-tech medical marvels accompanied this birth; human triumph would come not through the advances of technology but in a babe lain in a manger and wrapped in swaddling clothes. There we see that the promise of new life is realized in the birth of a child, respect for whose humanity lies at the very foundation of world peace.

Yet this is not just any child. The great joy that accompanies this birth comes from the recognition of a much greater mystery, one that reaches far beyond that little town of Bethlehem in years past. This is the nativity of God, the very One whom some scientists today consider a far-off fantasy, too distant from humanity to know as real. Yet in the event of that o so holy night, we celebrate the power of the divine Word still speaking to our world. As Pope Benedict XVI recently said in his weekly audience, Christmas reveals to us the God who “is made our neighbor and is very near to us, who has time for each of us and who has come to remain with us.”

No wonder, then, that this birthday comes to be celebrated with carols. In contrast to the everydayness of political speeches or scientific formulas or economic strategies, this season is one of angelic song. Our ordinary speech necessarily gives way to the idiom of lyric, for, as Walter Brueggemann writes, “there is something new here that can scarcely be articulated, and the articulation must match the reality of the newness.”

That newness is reflected in the tradition of Christmas caroling. These seasonal sounds have a unique musical character that may be attributed to a chord pattern dating back as far as the thirteenth century. Later, in the nineteenth century, the singing of carols was combined with biblical readings (“lessons”) of the Nativity story to form church services. Today, even outside of church, the lyrics remain so popular that they pass into the lexicon we adopt in this season, as readers might have detected in the fifteen allusions in this piece!

The music come in many forms: choir voices in melodious union, bells rung in harmonious tones, even drums played by little boys. Whatever be the words we use or the tunes we hum, the sound of the season is first and foremost played in our hearts and souls, there where no matter what else is going on in the world, if we recognize the gift our world has been given, we can still have ourselves a Merry Christmas.