

“O Little Town of Bethlehem”

Christmas Eve 2010

“O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by;
yet, in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light;
the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

Have you ever been to Bethlehem?

I’ve been fortunate enough to have been there twice.

Once, about ten years into my ministry at St. Giles’, Prince George, a Lutheran pastor, Harold Witte, and his wife, Marilyn, and Colleen and I escorted a group of people from our congregations and the community on a visit to the Holy Land.

Another time, over ten years ago, Colleen and I escorted some people from Calvin Church on a visit to the Holy Land.

Bethlehem is a small Palestinian town about five miles south of Jerusalem.

It is a poor country cousin to the big city.

There are still some shepherd’s fields, where sheep and donkeys graze on the small tussocks of grass that grow in the crevices of the stony ground.

A few olive trees are also still able to survive
in the progressively shrinking fields.

There are now about 30,000 people living there.

The town, of course, includes a special site
– inside the ecumenical Church of the Nativity –
where Jesus is reputed to be born.

Here, too, many workers still work with olive wood
and make beautiful replicas of the nativity figures and animals
that were believed to have come and visited the baby born in Bethlehem
on that first holy night.

Bethlehem now has over thirty hotels and 300 handicraft workshops.
Interestingly enough, a number of these workers in olive wood
are Arab Christians.

The first time we visited Bethlehem,
 We took a local Arab bus from Jerusalem to visit the holy sites
 and the woodworkers' shops.
 People were still dressed as you might imagine, with Arab headgear
 and some of the people had a few chickens with them on the bus.
 It was a neat and an authentic experience!

The second time I think we took the tour bus that was provided.
 Sadly, I noticed that the woodworkers' shops had diminished.
 The number of Christians living there have depleted due to emigration.

If I were to go to Bethlehem again, I'm afraid I would notice
 something else that would be very disappointing.

Now, I'm told, there is a massive and high concrete wall
 -- known in Israel as a "security barrier" --
 that separates the Palestinians' land
 from what the Israelis' consider to be their land.
 As far as the Palestinians are concerned they are living in "occupied land."

Certainly, one cannot freely or easily travel
 from Jerusalem to Bethlehem any more.

"The hopes and fears of all the years are [still] met in [Bethlehem] tonight."

What happened there so long ago still speaks to people
 of many cultures and religions.

What happened there is known to the whole world.

"For Christ [the Messiah, as far as Christians are concerned]
 is born of Mary, and, gathered all above,
 while mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wondering love.
 O morning stars, together, proclaim the holy birth,
 and praises sing to God the King, and peace to all on earth."

This is still the prayer of people all over this fragile and broken planet earth.

We need peace in our hearts
 and peace among competing interests, everywhere.
 We need peace with God and peace among each other.

How does that peace come to us?

“How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!
 So God imparts to human hearts the blessings born of heaven.
 No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin,
 where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.”

It is a simple, mostly silent thing, that happened on that holy night:
 a baby born into the world, a fulfillment of centuries of longing,
 a promise of new life, completed in all that we know of the life of Christ.
 Perhaps there was only a momentary cry that night, to clear the lungs,
 and, then, a long sleep, and the bewonderment of parents and people
 looking on,
 marvelling at what God had done.

It happened before.
 But it happened uniquely then.
 And, it will, most likely, go on happening, again and again,
 until the very end of the story.
 It is a very human, and a tender, touching thing.

No blustering, no bullying,
 No spectacular shazzam, or power-tripping.
 Just the birth of a wonderful, beautiful baby boy, named Jesus.

Somehow, at that moment in time,
 Christians believe God came into our world in the form of a baby.
 God became one of us, beautiful and vulnerable.
 “God with us, revealed in us, Emmanuel.”

And so, now, what’s left for us to do?
 Are you ready for Christmas?

Let’s acknowledge the Lord; let’s receive him; let’s enjoy him;
 and, let’s let what happened affect whatever we do from this time forward.

“O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;
 cast out our sin and enter in; be born in us today.
 We hear the Christmas angels the great, glad tidings tell;
 oh come to us, abide with us, our Lord, Emmanuel.”

Amen



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