

The Journey to Bethlehem

First Sunday after Christmas Day, 28 December 2014. Scripture lessons: Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Psalm 147:13-21; Galatians 3:23-25, 4:4-7; John 1:1-18.

Of all the places I visited on a pilgrimage to Israel, Palestine and Jordan a little over a year ago, Bethlehem surprised me the most.

I confess that I was pretty ignorant about the political geography of Israel and Palestine. I had never been quite sure who had control of what, what the West Bank was actually west of. For those like me who don't have clear sense of this either, the West Bank is the area immediately west of the Dead Sea, about 2000 square miles. Jerusalem is on the border to the west. Like many regions in Israel and Palestine, this area has changed hands many times. It was under British rule following World War I. Jordan controlled it from 1948 to the 1967 war. Then Israel occupied the territory. Jordan relinquished control in 1988. Most of the international community now considers the area occupied territory, with Israel as the occupying country. Israel considers it disputed territory, not occupied. Israelis have built settlements in the region, especially the part closest to Jerusalem, which angers the Palestinians. Some Palestinian groups attack Israelis within the disputed territory and in Israel itself. This of course makes Israelis nervous and less likely to negotiate. So the Israeli government began erecting a 700 km wall along and within the West Bank in 2000, designed to keep Palestinians out.

Bethlehem, the place where Jesus was born, is in the West Bank. To get to Bethlehem from Jerusalem, you go through a military checkpoint in the barrier, like the entrance to Ft. Benning. Our guide was a Christian Arab living in Jerusalem with Israeli citizenship. He could travel freely across the checkpoint. But one of my colleagues in Indianapolis, a Christian Arab from Bethlehem with Palestinian citizenship, has to have a special permit to cross the checkpoints and go to Jerusalem. When she flies home to visit her family, she cannot fly into the Israeli airport at Tel Aviv. She has to fly to Jordan much farther away and then cross over from the Jordanian side to go see her family. She never goes to Jerusalem.

So going through the checkpoint to go visit Bethlehem, I wondered if Mary and Joseph did something similar. You have probably heard the language from Luke's gospel dozens of times. *In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration, and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered.*

It sounds rather domestic and peaceful to us, but this was a forced movement of people to their ancestral homes by an occupying army. There was nothing domestic or peaceful about it.

On our pilgrimage, after crossing the checkpoint, we visited Shepherd's Field, said to be where the angel appeared to the shepherds. I was surprised to learn that this field is very near the field of Boaz, from the Book of Ruth in the Hebrew scriptures. According to that story, during a famine in Israel, a family with two sons left and went to Moab, an area east of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea. They stayed there for a long time. The two sons married Moabite women. Sadly, the father and both sons died. The mother, Naomi, having no other relatives in returned to her family in Bethlehem. Her Moabite daughter-in-law Ruth insisted on going with her. They came to Bethlehem and gleaned leftover grain from a field belonging to a man named Boaz. Ruth eventually married Boaz. They had a son named Obed who became the grandfather of King David, which is why Bethlehem is the city of David.

Like the story of Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem, the story of Ruth and Boaz is told as a romantic, peaceful, delightful tale. But it is really a story of famine and grief and desperation and poverty.

And you are probably aware that the shepherds were not as clean as they appear in our nativity scenes, nor as adorable as in our children's nativity pageants. Shepherds were often outlaws, stealing sheep from one another. They roamed the fields with sheep and had no permanent place to live.

So after crossing the checkpoint and driving by Boaz field and visiting Shepherd's Field and eating lunch beside the concrete barrier, we went to Church of the Nativity, built over the cave where Jesus is thought to have been born. The building is in very rough shape. Most Christian religious sites in Israel and Palestine have separate shrines beautifully maintained by different Christian groups. Church of the Nativity does not. It is one building jointly maintained by three churches. But the three churches have not been able to agree about how to maintain it. The city forced them to fix the roof a few years ago because the building was being damaged. Almost no other changes have been made to accommodate the millions of visitors who come each year. Unfortunately, the cave where Mary and Joseph sought shelter on the night Jesus was born is underneath the building, accessible only by a narrow set of stone steps. Hundreds of people gather at the top of those steps and sort of shove their way down the stairs. There is no line management, no guides organizing the millions of people who visit each year, just hundreds of angry Christian tourists waiting for their turn to go down the steps. As we waited to enter, groups in front of us started arguing about who had gotten there first. People were elbowing each other on the way to the manger. It was really shameful. Our guide Jimmy finally said to them, "This is a holy place. No arguing."

And in that moment, I wished Jimmy were in charge of the whole building, where three Christian groups still argue about maintenance. For that matter, I wished Jimmy were in charge of the whole region, where since the days of Mary and Joseph people have argued over land. This land of fighting and occupation and famine and grief is a holy place. No arguing. Wouldn't that be nice?

Our gospel lesson for today is John's version of the Christmas story. Luke tells us about the shepherds and angels. Matthew tells us about the Magi. Mark doesn't say anything about the birth of Jesus. That gospel starts with Jesus's baptism. John begins not with how Jesus came into the world or what he did when he got here but why.

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being with him and without him not one thing has come into being. What has come into being in him was life and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.

Like the stories of Mary and Joseph and Ruth and Boaz and the shepherds, we are probably accustomed to hearing even this gospel lesson from John in peaceful, gentle ways. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. Isn't that lovely?

But do not forget that the darkness into which the light came in Jesus was dark indeed. This darkness still exists, even in the place where Jesus was born. And yet, what has come into being in him was life and the life was the light of all people. In the midst of hunger and poverty and war and occupation, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. And in the midst of our own sorrows and failures and confusion and fear we have seen his glory.

For many of us, Christmas is a peaceful, gentle holiday. We spend time with loved ones and lavish one another with gifts and decorate our houses and eat delicious foods. And we should do all of these things. Be merry. But even if Christmas is not so great, the good news is still true. God incarnate has occupied our occupied world. God has come to be with us. And all the world is a holy place. And someday, there will be no arguing, for the light that shines in the darkness will not be overcome. Thanks be to God.

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