

Sermon for Christmas, 2011
Luke 2:1-20

Good Evening! On this joyous occasion, I wish all of you a very Merry Christmas. In particular, to those of you who are visiting us tonight, I am delighted you are here. We consider ourselves blessed by the presence of guests and seekers, and we are pleased that you have chosen Christ Church to make your Christmas communion. Welcome!

My experience of Christmas, in many ways, is now colored by my trip to the Holy Land a year and a half ago. One of the excursions that my class from St. George's College in Jerusalem took one day was an outing to Bethlehem. We boarded a bus and made the short trip, roughly five miles, to Bethlehem, passing through the checkpoint in the security wall that divides the occupied territories from Israel proper. We were told ahead of time not to take pictures of the checkpoint or the soldiers manning the checkpoint because of the risk that we might be delayed, or have our cameras confiscated, or possibly even face arrest. Once past the checkpoint, we headed first for the spot referred to as the Shepherd's Fields – where, according to tradition, the shepherds were guarding their flocks when the angel appeared to them declaring that the Messiah had been born. We visited the Franciscan chapel that marked the location, then boarded the buses and made our way to Bethlehem. We parked next to Manger Square and walked to the Church of the Holy Nativity. The Church of the Holy Nativity is the oldest church in the Holy Land still in use. The original church was built in 326 AD, destroyed in the early 6th century and rebuilt that same century. It is built over the place where, according to tradition, the cave that housed the manger stood. We entered through a low doorway called the Door of Humility because one has to bow low to pass through the opening. From there we walked through the nave to a point off to the side, where we stood in line to await our turn to descend down a set of steep steps to the Grotto of the Nativity – a cavern located under the church. It is a small rectangular space that has on one side an altar with a silver star in the floor where, according to tradition, Jesus was born. A few steps away are the Chapel of the Manger believed to be the place where the infant Christ laid in a manger. As with many sites in the Holy Land, I have no idea whether Jesus was actually born there or not. But perhaps it doesn't really matter. Simply being in Bethlehem, being in that very ancient church, being in that grotto below the

church, I felt as if I was in the place where the Nativity took place. I felt as if I were in a place of mystery, and presence.

This day is one of the great occasions in the Church year. We celebrate on this occasion that God drew close to us through the birth of Jesus. Christian belief and conviction maintains that in Jesus we have a glimpse into the very mystery of God. As one writer put it, Jesus is the human face of God. He is both fully and completely human and divine. If we want to understand the ways of God, the values of God, the desires of God, then we simply need to look to Jesus. We believe that it is through Jesus that God related to the human family by walking among us, eating and sleeping among us, and ultimately dying as one of us. Just as the sites in Bethlehem helped me to relate to the mystery of the Incarnation, so Jesus helps us to relate to God.

I suspect that there has been endless speculation down through the ages as to why God would choose to approach us in this matter. Why become human? Why be born in humble surroundings? Why take on human flesh and live as we do? Why the Incarnation?

We know that Jesus loved to tell stories. The Gospels are filled with stories and parables told by him. Some years ago, I came across a story that we might call a modern parable. It provides us with a way of thinking about the “why” of this occasion.

“Once upon a time, there was a man who looked upon Christmas as a lot of humbug. He wasn’t a Scrooge. He was a very kind and decent person, generous to his family, upright in all of his dealings with other people. But he didn’t believe all that stuff about an Incarnation which churches proclaim at Christmas. And he was too honest to pretend that he did.

On Christmas Eve, his wife and children went to church for the midnight service. He declined to accompany them. ‘I’d feel like a hypocrite,’ he explained. ‘I’d much rather stay at home. But I’ll wait up for you.’ Shortly after his family drove away in the car, snow began to fall. He went to the window and watched the flurries getting heavier and heavier. ‘If we must have Christmas,’ he reflected, ‘it’s nice to have a white one.’

He went back to his chair by the fireside and began to read his newspaper. A few minutes later, he was startled by a thudding sound. It was quickly followed by another, then another. He thought that someone must be

throwing snowballs at his living-room window. When he went to the front door to investigate, he found a flock of birds huddled miserably in the snow. They had been caught in the storm, and in a desperate search for shelter had tried to fly through his window.

‘I can’t let these poor creatures lie there and freeze,’ he thought. ‘But how can I help them?’ Then he remembered the barn where the children’s pony was stabled. It would provide a warm shelter. He quickly put on his coat and galoshes and jumped through the deepening snow to the barn. He opened the doors wide and turned on a light. But the birds did not come in.

‘Food will bring them in,’ he thought. So he hurried back to the house for bread crumbs, which he sprinkled on the snow to make a trail into the barn. To his dismay, the birds ignored the bread crumbs and continued to flop around helplessly in the snow. He tried shooing them into the barn by walking around and waving his arms. They scattered in every direction – except into the warm, lighted barn.

‘They find me a strange and terrifying creature,’ he said to himself, ‘and I can’t seem to think of any way to let them know they can trust me. If only I could be a bird myself for a few minutes, perhaps I could lead them to safety.’

Just at that moment, the church bells began to ring in the distance. He stood silently for a while, listening to the bells pealing the glad tidings of Christmas. Then he sank to his knees in the snow. ‘Now I do understand,’ he whispered. ‘Now I see why You had to do it.’

The great truth of Christmas is that God drew close to us that we might grow close to him. The great truth of Christmas is that through a new born babe in Bethlehem, God related to us in a manner that we might relate to him. The entire mystery of God is revealed to us in this birth. Love has drawn close to us.

May this night be a blessing to each of us, and a reminder that the Divine Reality, the source of all mystery reached out to us, drew close to us, and in fact, became one of us. Amen.