

Christmas Eve 2019

Six weeks ago I was there. In Bethlehem.

It's certainly not to brag, nor to compare myself or our group to Mary and Joseph, because it's quite incomparable. For example: no angel chorus for our trip. Another example: I didn't give birth to the Messiah, the Lord. Actually, I didn't give birth at all.

But some then-and-now gives perspective. So in other divergent details, I was coming up from contemporary coastal Tel Aviv, while the betrothed wayfarers journeyed south from ancient Nazareth.

The Bible doesn't indicate anything about a donkey, you may be surprised to observe, yet we may safely hunch that the expectant couple didn't travel on a coach bus with WiFi.

One constant is military occupation. Imperial threats prompted the original risky trek 80 miles through Palestine for the bursting pregnant young woman and her caring fiancé, while we witnessed confrontational soldiers at checkpoints who would harass or maybe totally preclude their travel.

When they made it to Bethlehem, the precarious parents-to-be were on the hunt for a place to stay. My group's accommodations were pre-arranged by the tour company, and not only was the bed in my room plenty comfy but I had a lovely evening view over the lights of the city, which is still at heart that same little town of Bethlehem with dark streets where the laboring mother and descendant of David could find no room in the inn.

Ironically, the crowded place while I was there weren't the hospitable hotels but was, in fact, the little cave under the Church of the Nativity, for centuries claimed as the spot of Jesus' birth. With bustling back-to-back worship services, bowing and chanting, the line stretched on for three hours or more. The old stable that hosted the unstable family, the out-of-the-way outpost for the outcasts had become the center of attention and most popular place in town, so

buzzing and busy we couldn't even get in, as if it were an A-list club hot spot and not a last resort.

But with attention on the ancient labor and delivery venue amid the manure of a cave with its bassinet filled with saliva-saturated hay—that such an odd place could draw attention!—maybe rather than distinctions between Mary the mother of God and myself, maybe the more obvious match is with the shepherds.

That association isn't so much for my claiming responsibility for this flock, nor prompted by personal hygiene, nor for sleeping outside yesterday, since the only thing I was keeping watch over by night was the inside of my eyelids.

The shepherds did come flocking (indeed!) to the unlikely maternity ward, not bearing gifts, not bothering to use hand sanitizer on the way in, not asking permission or taking turns or lowering their voices for the tuckered tot and exhausted mother, jostling to elbow in on a view of the holiness, a little encounter with God.

That still serves as a description of what happens at the Church of the Nativity.

I'd also suggest it's why we arrive here tonight, our own local pilgrimage to meet baby Jesus and witness the divine.

So as we're assigned the part of shepherds in this pageant, one more detail struck me in Bethlehem, not then-and-now but there-and-here: for a town at the very center of Christmas, it didn't feel like Christmas there. For twice that long our stores have been decked out up to our elfish ears in holiday décor, but Christmas decorations weren't much around Bethlehem at all. A few lights and stars, but not evergreens or Santa hats or dazzlingly-wrapped packages. Mostly life seemed to go on. The farmers' market had stacks of fruit. Students kicked soccer balls. Bus drivers smoked and talked with each other.

We, far from Bethlehem, are so invested in Christmas preparations, while they barely bothered. We sense this time as set apart, as removed from regular life. It's a lot of what we long for! We may not be trying to go back in time,

but our traditions can still feel like it, including as we reenact or re-erect manger scenes.

So we don't prefer the ornate structure of the Church of the Nativity and its thronging diverse devotees obscuring the story. We want a quaint cave. We want it to feel quietly pastoral, even though that one-time stable had sheep squalor and a bawling baby. We want idyllic, cozy, picturesque—neither like a crowded gaudy church nor like scary unhygienic childbirth and the forlorn loneliness where shepherds were surely no substitute for the absence of Mary's mother to help in the early days. We cherish this time of year for being serene, for some of you even the rare wishing for snowfall, for things that are beautiful and pleasant and dear.

While we might not wish ourselves off to Bethlehem now, neither should we dream back to bygone Bethlehem. With shepherds' perspective, we notice that witnessing the birth really is what this is about, what is essential, and not ambience, or a certain place or time, or what comes before or after.

Clearly, the shepherds hadn't prepared for Christmas. They didn't have notice to deck and dazzle and dress up and clean up. They didn't get their shopping done or carefully plan menus. So preparation or lack of preparedness isn't the point.

Afterward, the shepherds didn't leave with a to-do list. They just celebrated. They didn't rush off as if sent to work for justice or plan any other missions. Such may show we've gone away distracted in our own thoughts and not focused on the baby, the angels' song, the joy and praise and holy pondering at this good news of what God is up to.

We arrive for Christmas here tonight not to imagine warping through time and space to Bethlehem. We don't come to escape normal life or ignore reality or pretend into some frame of mind. We know the world as it is, with things that go right and that don't, with its good traditions and its constant change, in regular days and with what's beautiful and memorable, with what we wish would stay just as it is and all that we long to be different, with our sharp lack of blissfulness

but also recognizing we do have and share happiness.

That is to say, we come as modern shepherds. Folks who live in the world, who aren't perfect, who won't be. We come because we heard there's a birth. A birth that is good news for us and for all the world. Behold! to you is born a Savior. We come because this birth exclaims that God is not someplace apart, not waiting for our lives to be in order, not only when we've cleaned up our act, not restricted to special places or exceptional occasions that shine with a tranquil glow.

God is not cut off from us, from our lives, from where you've been and where you'll go. That is where God is working, transcending, enlivening. With you. For you. For peace on earth. Salaam. The shalom that means all is right. Ready or not, we come here to witness this good news, news we need, news we can barely believe. Then we go on our way, glorifying and praising God for all that we've heard and seen. It's not because suddenly everything in the world is all right. And it's because it is.