

Primary Reading: Luke 2:1-20

Join me on a journey. It's much longer than the journey which Joseph and Mary have taken from Nazareth to Bethlehem, though our journey will take much less time. Joseph and Mary with child in her womb cross deserts and streams, while we sweep lightly across oceans and years of generations.

But our destination is the same as Joseph's, Mary's, and that child emerging from the womb: a stable turned birth place. Hear again the story: *While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

The *Church of the Nativity* in Bethlehem is probably the oldest Christian church in the world which has stayed in use, built in the year 339. And this very night, Christians gather there to sing carols at midnight. Their voices, like ours, are filling that 1700 year old sanctuary built next to the cave where animals found rest and Jesus perhaps first laid his head.

I visited this Church of the Nativity when I was in Bethlehem in May of 2000. And I must admit, as I entered the sanctuary, bending my head to enter the small side door, I had high expectations. As a college student, I desperately yearned for some sort of profound spiritual experience... I would settle for a message from angels or even a still, small voice. Anything to show me that this was a sacred, a holy place... a sacred, a holy moment.

But as I walked around and prayed at this church, the stones seemed to me no more sacred than rocks I'd seen before. If anything, my prayers felt flat. And all the incense couldn't cover the damp smell of the small cave directly below the altar... a smell not unlike Jewel Cave. I have to say, I was disappointed by how real it was. I wanted an experience that was more surreal than real.

Perhaps on this night or in these days of Christmas, you like me, have a heart that yearns for some sort of spiritual experience. Desperate expectations for a worship or prayer that feels surreal, wanting family interactions to rise above the usual level of dysfunction, hoping our singing this holy night to sound like the Mormon Tabernacle Choir is in our midst.

And maybe you will feel these things this night. I hope you do. I desperately desire for you to feel grace, peace, forgiveness, love.

But if your expectations aren't met, know that this night you are in good company. Because this Christmas Eve when we celebrate the birth of a child, I wonder if our celebration doesn't center around extraordinary experiences as it is simply *celebrating the mystery of God in the ordinary*.

As one of my favorite singer-songwriters Sufjan Stevens once wrote:

The Christ Child, an infant baby, helplessly crying, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in the manger, trembling and suckling and cooing and burping and crying and laughing and giggling and spitting up breast milk all over the place.

This [is] the mysterious incarnation of God, who came to Planet Earth not as a Divine Warrior or a Supernatural Sorcerer or an Army of Alien Androids, but as a helpless newborn baby, probably not much bigger than a six pack of acrylic tube socks.

The mysterious incarnation of God. Which shatters like a glass ornament on a cold, stone floor any image we have of God as an old, bearded guy in the heavens... And instead, a new vision of God is born into our lives – a God who sympathizes so deeply with the poor, with the fragile, with *our vulnerability*, and with *our dysfunctional lives*... that this very night God takes on the frail flesh of a newborn infant.

What kind of a God would do this? Maybe a God who celebrates the ordinary in our lives with extraordinary love and peace. Perhaps a God who came to save us from everything we so desperately desire to be saved from and much more. Or possibly a God who's presence shines through every crack and crevice and every cave of this world... from Bethlehem to here in the Black Hills.

Elisabeth and I – as we expect our first child about two months from now – are learning about *birth plans*. Apparently you’re expected to come up with a *plan for your birth*: what kind of medication you’d like or not like, how many people you’d like present at the birth, and other preferences you have for the birth.

As the story from Luke continues, apparently Mary’s birth plan didn’t include anything about telling shepherds *it’d be best if they stayed in the waiting area*. Instead, they gather around the manger. Shepherds, fresh from their fields, perhaps still *smelling fresh of the fields and sheep*.

When our baby is born, God-willing, we plan to call family and friends – the *really important* people in our lives. What would God have in mind telling this Good News (this Gospel) first to shepherds smelling fresh of fields. We might ask, what kind of a birth plan does this God have?

It seems that God’s birth plan involves bringing hope to places of fear; bringing praise and amazement to places of curiosity; bringing peace and love to places of conflict and pain.

Remember? This is how it happened with the shepherds... With their own disbelief and fear turned to amazement the shepherds travel with curious hearts to Bethlehem... Gathering around the manger, they tell their story of when the Good News (this Gospel) first came to them.

“This messenger,” the shepherds say, “told us in fields not far from here, this very night: *Don’t be afraid, I bring you good news (the Gospel) – A child is born to you today. And this child who was born is the Messiah, the Christ, the Living God incarnate among you.*”

Could it be that this infant would lead the world in the way of peace? Could it be that this infant IS LEADING the world in the way of peace? Could it be this infant HAS LEAD and still leads the world in the way of peace?

Or might it be that truth like love and peace isn’t something carved on stone walls or even written like words in a book, but that the *truth of this holy night is that like love and peace is an event – like the birth of a child?* And might it be that God’s birth plan for the world continues to unfold on this very evening? Could it be that God’s peace and love continue to spread

even now like candles being lit, one from another, the flame being passed and growing?

Good questions for us like Mary to ponder in our hearts like treasures, like gifts from a God who's birth plan stretches across ages and oceans. Amen.