

Not a Typical Christmas Eve in Bethlehem

Christmas EveB, Luke 2:1-14, Isa 9:2-7

Grace Church Newton

December 24, 2023

THIS IS A DRAFT TEXT OF THE SERMON. IT MAY VARY FROM THE PRESENTED VERSION. PLEASE EXCUSE TYPOS AND GRAMMATICAL ERRORS, AND DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION.

*“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light...
For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given” (Isa 9:2, 6). Amen.*

On a typical twenty-first century Christmas Eve in Bethlehem, crowds gather, decorations adorn the plaza, festive processions pass through, music and singing and church bells ring for midnight mass celebrating the annual remembrance of the birth of Jesus. On the site where, as tradition has it, the manger in which Jesus was laid at his birth, (there) the Church of the Nativity now stands. And in this church, on a typical Christmas Eve in Bethlehem, locals and visitors alike come to celebrate, joined by public figures from all three Abrahamic faiths – Christian, Jewish, Muslim – who share this contested land just inside the West Bank. On a typical Christmas Eve in Bethlehem, the manger scene at the Church of the Nativity features a baby, laid in fresh straw, in a manger.

This year – tonight – this is not a typical Christmas Eve in Bethlehem. This year in Bethlehem, in place of that manger scene at the Church of the Nativity, instead of a bed of straw, the baby has been placed on a mound of rubble from the war [[Source](#)]. In this land of Jesus’ birth, in this very town where he was born according to the gospel of Luke that was read tonight – this is not a typical Christmas Eve in Bethlehem. On this night, as the eyes of the world...as *our* eyes are drawn toward Bethlehem, our hearts are heavy.

As we think about the war in Israel and Gaza, as we think about the ongoing war in Ukraine, as we consider the conditions in which millions of refugees around the world are struggling, as we think about a time of darkness – in many ways – here in the U.S...this light Isaiah promised, this light that shines on those who walked in darkness, this light may feel fragile and distant.

It seems to me that it is especially at times like this – times of darkness and hardship – that our celebration of Christmas is most critical. The truths that are embedded in the story of Jesus’ birth are as important now as ever. God entered into history and became one of us. The creator of all things became human. Love came in the form of a baby – tiny, vulnerable,

utterly dependent. Love came, and chose its home among the poor, in a refugee family, under the thumb of imperial oppression. God became human through a mother, we are told, who reached back into her Jewish tradition to reclaim the revolutionary, prophetic teaching of her faith. In the chapter immediately prior to the verses we heard tonight, this mother, Mary, sang out to a God of justice, a God of reversal. “God has cast down the mighty from their thrones” and “lifted up the lowly,” she sings. God has “filled the hungry with good things” and “sent the rich away empty.” God has “scattered the proud in their conceit,” but “has come to the help of his servant Israel,” for God “has remembered his promise of mercy.”

Into *this* moment God was born. Vulnerable. Fragile. Far from the centers of earthly power. Yet to a mother who was humble and proud and brave and faithful, foreshadowing the same in him. These are the truths embedded in the story of Jesus’ birth.

This is no typical Christmas Eve in Bethlehem. If ever there were a time when this God of Love, this reversal of human power and expectation, this promised light coming into the world in all its fragility – if ever there were a time when these truths were needed, tonight would certainly be one of those times. I can hear the Magnificat – Mary’s song – ringing forth as a battle cry against the forces that would diminish human life, against those who would prioritize power over compassion, who would seek *their* definition of victory over *God’s* desire for human flourishing.

This is no typical Christmas Eve in Bethlehem. On this darkest of nights in the land of Jesus’ birth, our call is to hold the light. To find a way to pass on joy. To do our part to carry for the world this fragile yet all powerful gift of God in the form of a baby. This gift of love among us in all circumstances, at all times. Tonight, we hold the light.

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