

B Christmas Eve 12.24.23

Luke 2:1-20

Focus Statement: Jesus is born into our real lives.

You may have seen images in the news of the nativity scene at Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem, it has drawn international attention this year. Christmas, a fitting name for a church in Bethlehem, is part of our partner denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land. But before we talk about this year's nativity scene, let me mention that not just Christmas Lutheran, but the whole city of Bethlehem knows what it's famous for. I joke every year on Holy Trinity Sunday that it's our day, Christmas is Bethlehem's season. Every December, lights adorn cobblestone streets of the city, a Christmas tree in Manger Square is a gathering point for locals and visitors alike to sing carols, Christmas parades full of musicians snake through the narrow roadways, and Santas wait on corners, doling out joy to passing children. Just off Manger Square sits the ancient Church of the Nativity. The current basilica was built in the sixth century, but references to a church on the spot believed to be the historical site of Jesus' birth date from as early as 333 CE. This, as an aside, was part of the devotional practice of the Byzantines, building churches on top of theologically significant locations. The Holy Land is dotted with churches and basilicas located on top of places where various religious events took place. But I digress. The point is, Bethlehem knows what it's known for, and it embraces it wholeheartedly.

This year is different. Though less than six miles from Jerusalem, Bethlehem is a West Bank city, separated from Israel by a thirty-foot-high concrete wall. From behind the wall, in solidarity with Gaza, there are no decorations in Bethlehem this year. No lights, no tree, no

parades or joyous Santas. As a community, the churches of Bethlehem made the decision not to decorate for Christmas this year.

Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church sits up the road from Manger Square, less than a third of a mile. Like most Lutheran churches—most churches, really—setting up for Christmas worship, they put a nativity scene in their sanctuary. But this year, their nativity scene is different. Instead of setting it up in front of a stable backdrop, like we often do, they brought in a pile of broken cement and paving stones from a collapsed home, mimicking images of bombed out buildings in Gaza. Throughout the wreckage, they placed their nativity figurines, shepherds, camels, sheep, Mary and Joseph, wise men, all ornately carved from olive wood as artisans have been doing for centuries. In the center lies Jesus, wrapped in a Palestinian keffiyeh, the baby Christ born under rubble.

I was telling Eileen at Bible chat this week, one of the things that gets me about this Luke text is that something new catches me every year. There are, I'll admit, some texts that come around and I think, what new thing do I have to say about this one. But with Luke two, even though we read it literally every year on Christmas Eve, I find that something new grabs me every time. This year it was this glaring reminder that Bethlehem is a real place. Bethlehem holds such a place in our imagination that it's easy to keep it there, an ancient scene so far removed from our own real lived lives. But Bethlehem is not Hogwarts, it's not Narnia, or a galaxy far, far away. It is a real place, with real people, people who still live and work and worship and die there. It is a real place today, and it was a real place two thousand years ago. The people in our Gospel reading were no less real than the

inhabitants of the city today. And the time in which Jesus was born no less tenuous than our own. The occupying force was the Romans, the collaborating powers, the Herodians, Pharisees, and religious elites, but the effect on average, everyday Judeans the same. Fear and destruction on a grand scale, overlooked in the machinations of a global power struggle.

The Christmas story is the story of a God born in a hard, broken, messed up world, to lonely, forgotten, overlooked people. Not despite the circumstances, but because of them. Because ours is a God who shows up in the hard, in the vulnerable, in the painful. Ours is a God whose strength is in weakness, whose power is in grace, and whose glory is in forgiveness.

And here's the other thing about our God who shows up because of everything. The churches of Bethlehem are not celebrating Christmas this year, but Christ will still come. In fact, Bethlehem is seven hours ahead of us, Christ has already come. I saw on Facebook as I was leaving to come here this evening, pictures of the worship this evening in Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church. There was also worship in the Church of the Nativity. Just like there was worship in Kiev tonight, worship in the Congo. We're ahead of them, but there will be worship all along our southern border, worship in inner city Detroit and Chicago. Worship in Uvaldi, in Oxford, Michigan, in Prague. There is no place too bombed out, broken, lost, or forgotten for the Christ child to be born, because Jesus is always present with the lost, the least, and the lowly.

I mentioned in Bible chat this week that Luke two doesn't tell us the date on which Jesus was born. But since there were shepherds in the fields, it likely wasn't the 25th of December, because it's winter in Bethlehem right now just like it's winter here. Bethlehem is a little warmer than we are in Michigan, but not much. There wouldn't be sheep and shepherds in the fields in December. The Bible doesn't tell us the date of Christ's birth, we celebrate it on December 25th for theological reasons. Today we are just past the winter solstice. The change is too small to tell yet, but the days are already getting longer. Sunlight and warmth are slowly creeping back into the world. We celebrate the birth of the Christ child on December 25th because it reminds us that God's love illuminates the harshest places. It reminds us of a God who is always, always, always with us. Born into this world that God loves so much, living and teaching, dying and rising, so that nothing can ever separate us from that love.

When you leave worship this evening, I invite you to look up at the stars. It's overcast, I realize that, but the stars are still up there even though we cannot see them. In fact, that it's overcast, and you can't actually see the stars may make this even that much better of an activity. Because the stars you see overhead, or can't see right now but know are there, those are the same stars that shined over Bethlehem tonight, the same stars that shined there some two-thousand years ago when Jesus was born. Dear people of God. Jesus Christ, the bringer of peace, is born among us, all of us, real people with real hopes and dreams, fears and longings, this night and every night. Thanks be to our God who comes among us, a real God for real people. Amen.