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Luke 2:1-20

Isaiah 9:2-7

Psalm 96

Titus 2:11-14

December 24, 2019

The Nativity of our Lord

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I remember the first time I traveled to Bethlehem. I was devastated. I am not sure what I expected...some rolling hills, a few make shift barns, a couple of cows and a few goats. Instead, what I found was a worn out town, marked by concrete and bill boards, streets littered with trash, and old men sitting in the town square commiserating. Horns honked, kids laughed, armed military carried machine guns.

There wasn't a barn or a cow anywhere in sight. Instead of the smell of hay, I smelled exhaust fumes. Instead of the quiet of the night, I heard the busy sounds of daily life in a crowded town tucked behind check points and barrier walls. Bethlehem didn't feel holy. It certainly wasn't quiet and sweet.

I was disappointed. This Bethlehem was messy and unkempt. The separation barrier, a wall that stretches for miles dividing Israel from the West Bank draws a stark line between Bethlehem and Jerusalem. There is no easy way to get there. What should be a 10-minute drive becomes an hour or more getting through check points, walking through passageways lined with metal bars and armed guards at their stations. Travelers, like myself, are welcomed to Bethlehem into a far different reality than the narratives we were told growing up.

Bethlehem is a living symbol of the complicated nature of humanity. Of Christians, Muslims, and Jews, of Israelis and Palestinians in conflict over land and resources and holy sites. The places Mary and Joseph and Jesus walked are no longer accessible by free will. In Bethlehem, you don't have to look far to see a shelled out house or the remnants of bus stop destroyed by a bomb.

I remember on that first visit to Bethlehem I kept trying to find something holy in this place. And so, I entered the Church of the Nativity, a huge open expanse of a church in the center of town. Tucked in a side wall was an alcove about a 3' square in area. If you didn't look for it, you would miss it. I had to get down on my hands and knees to see it fully. The alcove was covered in marble on all sides and ornate candles hung around the perimeter. In the middle was a hole in the ground, the hole was lined with silver. You could stick your hand inside and touch the ground beneath. As tradition has it, this is the spot where Jesus was born.

That's it. A silver lined hole in the ground. When I touched it, I didn't feel sparks. I didn't get warm fuzzies. It was a strange way to be in the presence of something so sacred. Tourists lined up to see it. Some cried. Others prayed. While others passed by without much reaction. I left feeling empty.

It took me a number of years, and a few more visits to Bethlehem to finally get it.

Holiness isn't bound to the quiet, uncomplicated moments of life. It isn't relegated to that simple nativity scene and it doesn't require a barn and a cow. If that was the kind of holiness I was looking for, I would never find it. Because I learned in Bethlehem that holiness is found in the confusion, the busyness, the dirty and the smelly, the difficult and the complicated. It's found in life as we live it, within you and me, within individuals seeking to build something beautiful, something hopeful, something good.

When I traveled back to Bethlehem years later I started to see holiness not in the singular place where Christ was born, and certainly not in that silver lined hole in the ground. Instead, I started to see it in each and every person that came to that place to learn something about God. The people who came wanting to touch and feel and be a little closer to God's love, a love so great that Jesus was sent to be among us. I saw holiness in those people who believed in peace and unity and trust and goodwill no matter how messy things were around them.

Touching that spot in the Church of the Nativity brought all of us pilgrims a little closer to the reality of God's love and the possibilities of that love. I think (I hope) we were changed because of it. From the thousands of prayers that were said in that one place, from the generations of Christians who wanted to see and feel the impact of Jesus' birth, Bethlehem held for me a new reality of holiness. A holiness that transcends a time and a place and breaks into our lives just as we are.

There's something else beautiful about Bethlehem. As you walk along the barrier wall on the Bethlehem side you see a lot of graffiti. Graffiti for peace and liberation. Graffiti that expresses frustration and hope. Words of unity. Words of pain. Words of life being lived. And as I read the hopes and dreams along the wall, I saw these words written in spray paint...*"Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that."*

Light and love. Words spoken by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Words spray painted on a concrete barrier in Bethlehem. Words that tell the story of God's love coming into the world. Words to remind us that within each of us is the opportunity to live into holiness, to transform the dark and messy places of this world and indeed, to transform the dark and messy places within ourselves.

The lesson of Bethlehem? If you are waiting for the perfect quiet moment to find holiness, you won't find it. So stop waiting...it's time to seek holiness in the places we avoid, in the ordinary every day moments of life, in the noise, in the pain, in the hurt. When we move into those times and let the love of God and the gift of Jesus Christ shine forth, we turn the unwelcome moments into moments of hope and reconciliation, into moments of community and compassion. That is the light and love of Jesus Christ.

Bethlehem reminds us to grasp onto that kind of messy holiness, to feel Christ's presence in the midst of your life...whatever it may look like...and to know that you are loved. Whoever wrote those famous words from Dr. King on the wall believed that love to be true. They knew that holiness is found there – within love for one another - and that that kind of love when held between people can change everything.

Thanks be to God. Amen.