

“Let Peace Begin With Me”

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O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie. Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by... In the Bethlehem I heard about in childhood it was always night – quiet, dark and dreamy. A little village landscape, with shepherds and angels put in the right places, and stars that looked like jewels. I never thought of it as a real place. Most people don't. A few years ago, when I was preparing to lead a group from this congregation to Israel and Palestine, I received a telephone call in the front office. Our volunteer told the caller I was in a meeting. He replied that he was calling from *Bethlehem*. “I'll have her call you *right back*,” the volunteer said, thinking, Buddy, we get calls from Pennsylvania all the time. But he insisted, “No, I'm calling from the Middle East, BETHLEHEM, you know, as in “O Little Town of?” (He really said this.) She got me out of the meeting.

Bethlehem is a real place. In the spring of 2008, Robert and I stood in what the people of Bethlehem call “Manger Square” – that weird mix of deep veneration and commercial enterprise that is common in the Holy Land. The Church of the Nativity was there, which was originally built in the fourth century by Constantine, because his mother believed the cave in which Jesus had been born was precisely in that spot. In the center of the church, there are some steps going down into a grotto, which has a plexi-glass window, protecting some dirt and rubble believed to be the place of the manger. You have to wait your turn as tourists and pilgrims line up to pay homage and snap pictures of the rubble.

The church itself has been destroyed and rebuilt many times, in the various squabbles, both political and religious. Calling a place ‘holy’ is bound to make it all the more desirable a target for a conquering army. To get into the church, there is a small door about half the height of an average person. It is called the “door of humility”, supposedly because people must bow humbly as they enter, but actually it was designed to keep out people's animals and carts for looting the place of its marble and other treasures. The theft of the silver star in 1847 is said to have brought on the Crimean war. In 1852, it was agreed that the Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Armenian churches would have joint ownership and responsibility.

It was quiet in the church and in manger square when we were there, but not because it was so holy. There was a great drop in visits by tourists and pilgrims. It was 8 years after the second intifada, or uprising, and a few years after the building of the wall, euphemistically referred to by some as “the security fence”.

Many groups stopped going to Bethlehem altogether, others did a quick, nervous tour of the church and went back over to the Israeli side, and still others had half their folks snoozing in tour buses as they waited for their braver friends visiting Manger Square. People like us were scarce.

Our tour guide took us out into the courtyard, and pointed out the spot where George W. Bush had stood and addressed the people that previous winter. There were a few other groups and couples also being shown where this was. Our guide said, “You see all of the other tour guides pointing to this spot? None of them are pointing *above* the spot.” On the cross-beams up above, you could still see bullet holes from 2002, when the Israeli army fired into the church where Palestinians, both militants and civilians, were holed up. Better not to bring it up – business was bad enough already. We felt so much for them. And we felt lucky and not a little guilty that we could just go home.

Bethlehem was never the same for me. There was little there that inspired hope for peace. And it would have stayed that way if I hadn’t returned a year later. But I was so moved by what we saw, that I made a promise to the people we met that I would take more Americans to see it. And so the following year, 14 of us were standing in Manger Square.

Part of our trip involved staying overnight with Palestinian families. Some of us had better accommodations than others – heat was scarce, food was scarce. It was not the Ritz. But I was intrigued by the family life I saw there. They built their homes for extended family. It began with a mother and father on the ground floor, raising their kids, and often running a family business there or nearby. The homes were made of concrete, with iron support rods sticking up from the roof. This was so that when the children of these families grew up and had a family, they could add another story, supported by the rods. The next child to get married would build their home on top of that. And so on, until they reached the top of the rods, and then you began again from the ground. Preferably on the same block. So most people lived with immediate family and were surrounded by their cousins in their neighborhood.

A typical American, I couldn’t help wondering, “What if you didn’t want to live there? What if you didn’t get along with your brothers and sisters? What happened when there were arguments – where did you go?”

Try to imagine your extended family living Palestinian style. My brothers and sister chose very different kinds of homes in very different towns, though still in Minnesota. My nieces and nephews have chosen to build homes in new developments, homes built to their own taste, that dwarf the one I grew up in. I have chosen to move across the country, living where I can practice Unitarian

Universalist ministry. We are very American in our choices, very independent of one another. We are considered a success.

For many of us, truth be told, it just feels easier to take one's extended family in small doses. We have that choice in our culture. There's always somewhere else to go. American culture and American family life are built around these ideas of individual choice, privacy and opportunity. Many of our decisions are based more on opportunity than family. We honored the life of Gwynne Smith yesterday, and I told a story I've told many times in eulogies for people in our church. In the 1940s, a young man is recruited at his college by someone from DuPont. They put down roots here – though often they must move again, and perhaps again, and then come back.

Marilyn Hyte told our job search group that when she hired young engineers to work for DuPont, they knew they were going to move all over the country, every few years. This was just part of the deal, something you expected. Now, times have changed, and it's more likely you will move because you have lost your job, or because you believe there is a better job elsewhere. I've seen the reverse of this pattern in older people – who move to a town to be near their children and grandchildren. They then must give up old friends and their church here. Sometimes they do so more than once, when their children have a different opportunity and move to another town. We do this because we can. We are mobile.

All of this opportunity and freedom serve us handsomely 364 days of the year. And they are strangely irrelevant and unhelpful to us at Christmas time. They don't teach us how to find happiness at home, with what we have and the people who are near us. And at Christmas time, there is a massive cultural pull to Bethlehem – that is, to some ideal place where home is idyllic and family life is close and warm. *O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie...* Christmas when I was a small child, was as magical as anything dreamed up by Disney or Hallmark. But growing up, with deaths in the family, real relationships that suffer from hurts and arguments, changed all that. There were years I didn't go home. I had a therapist who was fond of telling me before going off for the holidays: "May you have a disturbing Christmas." I usually did! I think he wanted me to have some realistic goals. For some of us, a visit with family over the holidays is a little like a visit to Bethlehem: we imagine a dreamy village on a quiet, starry night – and there is tension in the streets; there are buildings with visible bullet holes. Unsettled arguments and old, unhealed wounds. A young adult can stop feeling like the mature, evolved person she was just a few days ago, and more like the insecure 13-year-old person she became in those 4 walls. Not that I've ever felt that way. Holidays can bring out feelings of grief – of deeply missing people who are no longer at the Christmas table. Children who were expected to come home

are going elsewhere this year. We don't discuss it, we don't want to ruin other people's good time. We want everybody's Bethlehem to look as much like a Christmas card as possible.

But Bethlehem is a real place. And it is a holy place, where there is peace on earth. I was amazed by the people we talked to in Palestine, when they discussed their family lives. The man I stayed with, whose family made lovely olive wood crèches, said that he did not envy Americans. He had come to the United States around Christmas time a few years earlier, in order to sell his family's craftwork at a big exhibition hall in Boston. He did not like what he saw: overworked, overstressed adults who had long, aggravating commutes, who didn't see their kids all day. His shop was next door to his house. He saw his children at lunch time; they came into his shop and pestered him if they felt like it. He would have liked for there to be more prosperity in his town, but he had no desire to leave.

I thought that the secret to being happy there must lie in your ability to find peace with those who were around you. And so this Christmas, I believe the secret to being happy is to find the real Bethlehem and to make peace there. And by making peace, I don't mean making nice. I don't mean pretending nothing's wrong. I don't mean saying you've let something go before you really have. I do mean lowering your expectations a little, if they are too high. I mean practicing acceptance of the people in your family for who they are. Here's a scary idea: if there are unresolved arguments or wounds that might be helped by an advance phone call, you could make the phone call. Scary. I hate to tell you, but it's only December 12, so you still have time to do it. Peace, real peace, always takes great courage and not a little humility. It means deciding that it may not be so important to be right about something – which you may not be, by the way.

It also means, if you are feeling grief or sadness this year, don't paper over your feelings to spare other people. Let them in. Let them know who you really are and how you really are. The one thing that is true about the Bethlehem and the Christmas we see on cards is that it is about love. And we find real love when we can face the scary places and let people know us. May you have a disturbing Christmas. May you find the real Bethlehem. And through it, somehow, find real peace. Amen.