

Sermon First Sunday after Christmas

December 27, 2009

St. John's Episcopal Church

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These days the air is filled with Christmas carols about the little town of Bethlehem. Most of you have received Christmas cards with pictures of Bethlehem, its houses huddled together and its roofs illumined by a starry sky. Well, last month I was in the real live Bethlehem. And, it doesn't look like the pictures on our cards or seem like the lyrics of our songs. It is completely surrounded by a wall of several stories with guard towers and checkpoints and soldiers. There are crowds of pilgrims and tourists listening to church bells from a variety of churches with different theologies and liturgies, mingling with the call to prayer from Bethlehem's mosques. And, sitting on the hills is an Israeli settlement for thousands of people built on land both Israelis and Palestinians claim as theirs. And, this settlement is visible from every direction. In other words, the real live Bethlehem is politically charged, armed, contentious and fractured. Palestinians, both Muslim and Christian, unable to travel even the 5 miles to Jerusalem to pray and visit family, are trapped in their city- the little town of Bethlehem.

Being there, like being anywhere in Israel and the Palestinian territories, is a complicated and layered experience. I am profoundly moved to be in the places where Jesus walked, where patriarchs and prophets for nearly 3,000 years have taught and lived and died. Where countless pilgrims- Jewish, Christian and Muslim- have come to pray at their holy sites. Where holy people have shed their blood for justice and liberation and the dream of peace. And I am discouraged by the continuing and deepening fractures in the society and the loss of hope for peace in the region. And I am angry at injustice and the humiliation of people. And when I come home from this land we call holy, I need headache medicine, places to vent and phone numbers of senators to call and plead for reconciliation and justice.

Now, lest you think that this is a very gloomy message for 2 days after Christmas when the wrapping paper from your presents is still lying around the house and the remains of your favorite dessert is still on the counter or in the fridge, let's go back to the scriptures for this morning. We are told by Paul in his letter to the Galatians that "when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law..." This is the earliest reference to Mary in the scriptures. And notice that she is unnamed- simply "a woman"- to underscore Jesus' connection to the rest of

us. Like all of us, born of a woman, human like all of us. He lived in our world with our cares and burdens and joys. One of us.

And John's gospel goes on to say that "the Word became flesh and lived among us..." The Greek says it like this: "he pitched his tent among us." He became one of us in something as fragile as a tent. Joining our human condition with all its troubles, laughter and tears. Jesus is a real man living a real life in a real world. And, if the truth be told, the little town of Bethlehem was not so dreamy and peaceful the night he arrived. The country was occupied by Roman soldiers. Herod shortly afterwards killed all the little boys under two. The holy family fled from political repression and only returned after Herod was safely dead and buried. The inhabitants of the country wanted freedom from oppression. Some of them even plotted revolution and violence to achieve it. So, we should take the pictures of Bethlehem on our Christmas cards with a grain of salt. Things in Jesus' time weren't like a Disney film after all!

But this is all good news! One of the blessings of Christmas is that Jesus comes among us to live a real life- lived in a messy and complicated political world full of conflict, tensions and the constant threat of violence and oppression. Our Savior comes to save us in the midst of our world.

Jesus does not snatch us out of the world and save us **from** it. Instead, he lives among us in the world and saves us **within** it.

So every time you take action for justice- with marches, signs, letters, emails and phone calls, every time you try to reconcile differing opinions- at home, at church, at work, every time you struggle to understand a complicated issue- war, health insurance, the economy, the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan, every time you are adding your work and your passion to the saving work of Jesus.

As disciples of the child born in Bethlehem, we are called to immerse ourselves in the world God loves in all its complexity and messiness and contention. In all its wonder and beauty and grace. As disciples of the child born in Bethlehem, we pitch our tent among God's people in the midst of God's creation- right in the midst- up to our ears in the things of this world

And we work, hope and dream. We struggle and learn and ask forgiveness. We embrace strangers and make peace with enemies. In short, we do what Jesus did. We live real human lives. In a real world. Relying on the saving grace of God brought to us by a child in Bethlehem. Trusting in the compassion and understanding of one who pitched his tent among us. Always joyful because of the promise of a child born in Bethlehem, saving us in the heart of our world in the midst of our lives. And we do this day

after day for the whole of our lives until the day God calls us by name and welcomes us home.

And so to God whose power now at work in us can do infinitely more than we can even ask for or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus now and forever. Amen.