

Matthew 2:13-23
December 29, 2019
The Rev. Mark W. Jennings

I love visiting other churches. Especially the ones that are famous or notable in Christian history. Almost without exception they have exceeded my expectations, they were almost all more impressive and beautiful than I had anticipated: St. Paul's Cathedral in London; the spectacular Cathedral of our Lady in Strasbourg, France, which for many generations was the tallest building in the world; Westminster Abbey in London; John Calvin's Cathedral of St. Pierre in Geneva; the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. All amazing places to visit. The one that at least at first glance is the most unimpressive is perhaps the oldest of all the churches in Christendom. The church of the Holy Nativity in Bethlehem is built over the grotto or small cave that for centuries Christians have believed was the birthplace of Jesus. The writings of Justin Martyr in about 160 AD refer to a cave in Bethlehem as a place recognized as the place of Jesus' birth and of the manger. Writings in the third century from Origen and Eusebius also make reference to this cave. By the time Constantine was Roman Emperor in 313 and converted to Christianity, a church was built over this cave and Constantine's mother had it expanded. It has been rebuilt several times over the centuries, but it is still revered as one of the most holy sites in all of the Holy Land. But if you stand in Manger Square in Bethlehem and look at the church, it is much less impressive than all these other ones. When you go to enter it, you're shocked that the door is so small that you have to stoop over to even enter the church. Then you realize that it was intentionally built this way, that this is the Door of Humility, built that way so that even the most important visitor would have to bend over as a humble supplicant before they could enter this church. When you walk up the center aisle of the church you see that the humbleness was left at the door. There are lamps and ornate candleabra everywhere. Gold and marble adorn everything. You join the crowd going down the steps under the altar to the original grotto, passing underneath the high altar where seven lamps burn eternally, until you finally stand on the marble floor of the lower grotto where

a silver star marks the spot where Mary gave birth to Jesus. A few steps away is the Manger Chapel, a small space where the baby was placed in the feeding trough of the animals. This is perhaps the most sacred spot of our faith, and whether it is impressive or not, it is important because it reminds us of the tangible quality of the Incarnation. It reminds us that Christmas is real.

Erin and I were talking about that on Thursday. The day after Christmas, when we were just sitting with our coffee in the morning, out of the blue she asked me, “Theologically, what does Christmas mean to you?” And after thinking about it for a couple of minutes, I said that it was the mystery and the reality of the incarnation, that God came to be with us. That’s maybe the most important truth that the Christian faith has to tell. And that may be what sets the Christian faith apart from every other religious tradition. Not that Christianity is a system of belief or a discipline to help us to find our way to God. Rather it is a proclamation that God has come to be with us. And that’s what’s so important about Christmas. As Peter Gomes has said: “Christmas lends itself so easily to metaphor and sentiment. We need our metaphors, and sentiment is the grease without which our human machinery breakdown and wear out, but Christmas does not represent a sentiment, an idea, or even a feeling about God. Christmas belongs to those who recognize not the sense of the holidays but the real presence of God in their lives and in their world, not simply once upon a time long ago and far away, but here and now, inhabiting our hearts and struggling with us against the tangible realities that surround us. The world of Bethlehem was real, Caesar Augustus was real, Herod was real, taxation was real, death and slaughter were real, despair was real and normal; and in the midst of all of this God had to be made real, and was made real not in an ideal but in the flesh, for that is what the Incarnation was and is, and that is why we bow before its presence. “God with us,” for that is what Emmanuel means, is not just a translation of a Hebrew name but a translation of the living, loving purpose of God to be present in and among his creation. God does not abandon that which he makes; he becomes one with us that we might become one with him.”

When Erin and I were expecting our firstborn—I was filled with many emotions, but one of them was

powerlessness. There was not much that I could do to help. Especially when it came time to actually have the baby, I could say encouraging words but not a whole lot else. But one of the things Erin constantly wanted me to do to help was to rub her back. That I could do. And it reminded me of a meditation by Lisa Debney about Joseph and how he must have felt, but it brought back to me the reality of what that first Christmas must have been.

Joseph

My arm around your back
was all that I could offer as support,
as each unravelling chapter came.

My arm around your back was there
when you first heard the news
that heaven dwelt in you,
and words fled faster from me than response.

My arm around your back
was all that I could offer you
to reassure you that I would never desert.

My arm around your back
was all that I could offer as support
on Bethlehem's weary road,
as the journey wound round path and street
and doors closed swiftly in our faces.
My arm around your back was all I had
to protect you from despair.

As the child emerged in an open barn,
my arm around your back
was all I had to help you through.
To be a leaning post,
it seemed, was all that I could do
to show I struggled with you
in the birth.

It doesn't seem enough for one
who's destined to endure so much.
I should have words and eloquence or
money, land and powers of protection
that would buffer you
against the harshness of this world.
But all that I can offer is my arm around your back.
Its strength will never be enough to show
the strength of love that holds me to your side.
But ready still to comfort, to steady and to reassure,
my arm around your back, if needed, will be there.

Lisa Debney

And Joseph was the one who might have felt the reality of Christmas most closely. For it was Joseph to whom the angel appeared in a dream and told him to flee to Egypt. To hold his little family close because the danger as well as the blessings were real. And that "arm around the back" was an arm of protection.

We've said a lot about angels during the last month or so. Angels that are guardians, that are companions, that proclaim and inform. This last angel, whoever he was, does all three for the holy family. And it is all three that we are called to be with each other. To protect each other and the stranger among us. To walk with each other as a companion in joy and a comfort in grief. And to constantly remind each other of the good news of Christmas, that God has come to be with us and loves us fiercely and constantly.

Now in the words of the old prayer:

When the song of the angel is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost--To heal the broken--To feed the hungry--
To release the prisoner--To rebuild the nations--
To bring peace among brothers and sisters--
To make music in the heart.

That's the work of the angels. That's our work.