

The Christ We Already Know

When I was on my pilgrimage to Israel earlier this year, I remember being excited when we got to the stage of the journey where we were going to Bethlehem. We had spent the first few days in Nazareth and around the Sea of Galilee, seeing historical sites and visiting so many churches built on top of places mentioned in the gospels that they had all started to blend together for me. But finally we were going to go to Bethlehem and I couldn't wait.

I love the nativity story in the Bible. I love Christmas, not all the trappings and commercial excesses or any of that, but the actual Christmas story – the light, the hope, the promise of the incarnation, that God is with us. My faith is centered on that. So I was excited to get to Bethlehem and experience the place firsthand. But right from the start it was a little jarring for me. First off, Bethlehem is in the Palestinian territory, so it is less well-developed and more heavily patrolled and guarded than where we had come from, and that already seemed inappropriate for a place to experience the wonder of the Christ child.

Then we came to our visit of the Church of the Nativity, which is supposed to be built right over where Jesus was born – one of the two holiest places on the pilgrimage. The church was, of course, crowded with tour groups, busy and loud with pictures flashing and direction being given. But it was also under construction, adding to the mayhem. There was scaffolding everywhere, as they were trying to restore the ancient frescoes on the vaulted ceiling atop these huge marble columns. Our group was yelled at by the monks who run the church as we were apparently a little too loud and they were trying to say prayers in the functioning church part of the building. We waited in a long line to go down into this room beneath the main altar of the church, where they claim that the real birthplace of Jesus was. It was an airless stone room, dank, poorly lit and packed with too many people, all waiting in line to kneel down and kiss this gilded star on the floor which was supposed to mark the exact spot of the manger where Jesus was lain.

And rather than wait in such a line, I just pushed my way out, with the overwhelming feeling of, “this is not right. Nothing about this seems right.” I wanted to have an experience of Advent, of waiting in that holy place for the inbreaking of Christ in my life, but everything seemed wrong – the fighting and competition for space between competing groups, the anxiety-inducing crowdedness and busyness, the touristy spectacle and gold-inlaid preciousness, the massive marble columns and the signs of opulence, the darkness in place of light and the constricting spaces in a space where God imbued the world with grandeur; it made me feel tired and overwhelmed and I thought, “this was not how the birth of the Christ broke into our world.”

I thought about that experience this week as I tried to prepare my heart for the Advent season again. I thought about it because just as much as I felt like that was not the right atmosphere for what the place of the nativity should be like, I feel like our standard way of preparing for Christmas in our culture is not how we should prepare our hearts for the coming of the Christ. The December season mirrors all the things that were wrong for me there: it is a crowded and anxiety-inducing time, the season is gilded with signs of commercial opulence, and

there is no room for quietness, there is fighting in seemingly every community and it seems like most people who acknowledge Christmas are more tourists of the season than true followers of the Christ. Just like my experience of that space, many people's experience of the advent season and the lead-up to Christmas in our culture can be overwhelming and make you feel tired.

I read the words of Isaiah this morning and I echo his lament as my prayer: "O that God would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at God's presence." I can't blame others for building an unfitting church atop the place of the nativity, because we have built an unfitting world atop the promise of the incarnation. What we pass off as following Jesus is not worthy of the example of his birth, and in this season of Advent, we need to think again about how to prepare our hearts and our world for the coming of Christ anew. When Jesus comes a second time, we should not think that he will be any different than when he came first. God was born in a manger in a stable, not in a monument, and we should not think that Jesus wants grandiose signs to prepare for his next coming. He was called the prince of peace, we should not believe that we will usher in his return with squabbles, infighting, or outright war. He called the poor outcast shepherds to his side first to be the earliest witnesses to the miracle of God among us, we should never think that the rich and powerful have a prized place in the presence of God.

We must prepare, our hearts and our world for the coming of Christ. That is what Advent is about. That is our calling and our duty this season, but we should be thoughtful about how we do it, how we prepare a place for the Christ Child to be born anew in us, in our time and in our town. In his parable today, Jesus implores people to, "keep awake," but what he really means is, "be prepared." Be ready and make yourself ready, because Christmas is coming, with all its theological weight, all of the hopefulness that event carries, and we do not want to miss it because we are unprepared or looking for something other than what we know the Christ to be.

Maybe as we look to prepare a space for the Christ we should take our cues from the ones who have done it before, from Mary and Joseph as they made ready the world for the coming of God. Amidst a place and a people whose lack of caring about their well-being must have seemed downright hostile, they found their out-of-the-way corner, and through their love they made it a place where God chose to dwell. Rather than creating some picturesque image of what they wanted the place of the Christ to be, they remembered what was actually important – warmth, safety, love - and made those things the priority. What would it look like to focus this season on simply preparing the necessities, doing the truly important things, rather than trying to create a gilding monument in our lives? Can we each make our little corner of the world a place where safety and love reign, places hospitable to the presence of God? Amidst an exhausting journey, Mary and Joseph took the time they had to rest before Jesus was born into their lives, so they would be truly ready. Maybe for us in our time, the best way to prepare for the coming of Christmas is not to literally stay awake, but rather to rest, to cut from our lives those things that are not absolutely necessary, to make space for quiet, and to seek peace and rest so that we are prepared when Jesus does show up. Even if our hearts seem no more than a sad manger, no place for the Son of God, we can take the steps to make our lives ready to receive the gift of Jesus presence.

In the same way I feel like the Church of the Nativity in modern Bethlehem missed the mark on honoring the place of Jesus birth by straying so far from what made that manger holy all those years ago, I fear we miss the mark by preparing for a Christmas in a way that makes it

something other than what God intends it to be. It is in quiet stillness that we prepare for awe. It is in peace that we encounter Christ. It is when we reduce our lives down to the simple necessities, when we make safety and love the hallmarks of a space prepared for God, that we get to experience the inbreaking of Christ again into our hearts and our world. As we pray for Jesus' coming again into our lives, let us not do it with new revelations, but by returning once more to the Christ we have always known, the one revealed to us in the ancient story, the one who comes in quiet, simplicity, and hope. Amen.