

Christmas Parade

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Luke 2:1-11 — In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered and taxed. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for Mary to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were very afraid. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

Five years ago, I had the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity of being in Bethlehem over Christmas. At the time, I was living in the country of Jordan, so it wasn't too long of a trip for me. My parents and my sister Sarah flew across the ocean to join me there, and we stayed in Bethlehem and Jerusalem together for handful of days. Now, if you're in Bethlehem on Christmas Eve, the place to be is the Church of the Nativity, one of the oldest churches in the world. Inside of this massive church is a cave that, for at least 1700 years, tradition has held to be the site of Jesus's birth.

Having been in that church on Christmas Eve, I find it ironic that so many of our Christmas hymns describe the scene of the nativity as quiet, quaint, small, peaceful. In just a bit, for example, we'll all sing together, “O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie.” Well, Bethlehem isn't such a little town anymore, and at least on Christmas Eve, it is *anything* but still. When you enter the church, you are immediately surrounded by hundreds of people—hundreds of Palestinian Christians who live in the area, as well as hundreds of Christians from all over the world. What's more, if you're a Protestant Christian who isn't used to incense, chanting, and ornate decor in worship, then when you enter the church, you will also be immediately surrounded by sights, sounds, and smells that feel foreign to you—and in fact, they *are* foreign to you. The Church of the Nativity isn't run by, say, Presbyterian ministers from the United States (and rightly so). It's run mostly by Middle Eastern and European monks from the Roman Catholic church, the Greek Orthodox church, the Syriac Orthodox church, and the Armenian Orthodox church. The Church of the Nativity has been maintained for many hundreds of years by these members of our Christian family. But you all know as well as I do: whether a family is biological or spiritual, different members of a family have different ways of doing things, and it can be hard to get down with another family member's ways.

Let's say you're at the Church of the Nativity, and you want to see the actual spot where Jesus is believed to have been born. Say you're hoping to have a meaningful spiritual experience in that sacred space. So, you get in line with hundreds of others, standing shoulder-to-shoulder, inching your way forward, while everyone is talking and everything is echoing. As you try to focus, try to—you know—feel spiritual, you'll inevitably get distracted by languages that you don't understand, decorations that look gaudy to you, and strangers who keep bumping into you. Eventually, the line funnels down, and you're moving single-file. And finally, you're standing in front of the spot, which looks, curiously, like a large marble fireplace. Inside of it, there are large silver candles hanging down. Above it, there's a shiny metallic wall of nativity icons. All around it, there are colorful fabrics with gold embroidery and gold tassels. You kneel, because that's what you've seen everyone else do. You pause, trying to take in just how special this moment is, trying to think of a special prayer for this special moment—but all you can think about is how tacky all of this looks to your American Protestant eyes, and how there are hundreds of people waiting behind you, and how there's a monk right beside you, looking at you, whose job it is to tell you to move along. So, you let out a soft sigh, hastily pray a few silent words, and then move along.

Sometimes, our special moments aren't quite as special as we'd like them to be. Sometimes, we want things to go a certain way, believe that things *should* go a certain way, but then they don't. And all we can do about it is sigh. I don't know about you, but in my experience, Christmas-time is full of these moments. Judging by the commercials on TV, you'd think that it's a season of non-stop smiles and laughter and playing and resting—oh yeah, and shopping. But even when there is plenty of those things, there's also plenty of sighing. Sometimes, it's little things, like the pizza delivery person brought the wrong order. Other times, it's bigger things, like doing Christmas for the first time without a parent or spouse or other loved one. It's a season of joy, we're told, but life tells us that it's just as much a season of sighs.

The next morning, on Christmas day, my parents, sister, and I went to a coffee shop in Bethlehem. This coffee shop had a balcony overlooking the street, and there were four empty seats all together on the balcony, so we sat outside to enjoy the sunny weather. Within a few minutes, though, we were enjoying something else, which we had not expected: a parade. Apparently, on Christmas Day, thousands of Palestinian Christians come from all over the region to participate in and to watch this spectacular event. There were trumpets and drums, costumes and props, music and dancing, and we had as good of a seat as you could get. And as I sat there, enjoying the show, I remembered that these people know what it's like to sigh. These Palestinian Christians live under occupation, live in fear of a foreign military, struggle to survive in an economy strangled by a foreign government—all of which was also true for Mary and Joseph, by the way. And yet, on Christmas day, they throw a fabulous parade.

For me, during that Christmas in Bethlehem, the meaningful spiritual experience that I was looking for didn't happen at the Church of the Nativity; instead, it happened at that coffee shop and on that street. For me, God didn't necessarily show up when I returned to the holy site of the

manger, but God did show up at a different time, in an unexpected place. More specifically, God showed up among people who feel strangled by injustice and suffering, yet who somehow manage to gasp for air and then shout with defiant joy and resilient hope. Friends, if the special moments you're hoping for this holiday season don't feel special in the ways that you'd like them to, that's okay. Feel free to let out a soft sigh. Feel free to grieve. But then, be ready for God to show up some place else, some place unexpected, some place where things don't look quite so special or holy, some place where hope and peace are desperately needed. Because Christmas isn't just about God coming to be with us 2,000 years ago, in the person of Jesus; Christmas is about God coming to be with us here, now, and always, through the Spirit of the God who is Love. *That* is good news of great joy for all people.