

Christmas Day - 2009

John 1:1-14

Back in October, as part of my sabbatical experience, I had the opportunity to spend 10 days in Israel, and to be in the very places where Jesus lived and taught and shared God's love. It was an incredible experience in many ways. It was spiritually rewarding. And it gave me years of sermon material!

And yet, in many ways, being in Israel wasn't all that different from other places I've traveled to. In fact, sometimes because things seemed so much like everywhere else, there was an underlying feeling of disappointment that the places I was going weren't more spectacular. After all, I was traveling to places which are "holy sites" to us. Yet they were usually:

- A) crowded and noisy – not at all conducive to peace and contemplation ...
- B) filled with, quite frankly, some of the rudest, most obnoxious Christians I've ever encountered – not at all the kinds of people you'd want to point out to non-Christians as good examples of what it means to follow Jesus...!
- C) not all that impressive – the traditional site of Jesus' birth, for example, is just a small, dark cave – made worse by the tacky Crusader era decorations...!

So as I traveled to places where Jesus walked, I mostly encountered the world the way it is everywhere. I heard no choirs of angels. I saw no bright star in the sky. And I certainly experienced no silent night.

And deep down, isn't that what many of us want and hope for in our religious experiences? Angels and signs and otherworldly experiences are what we expect to happen when God draws close to us. And probably that's why we love story of Jesus' birth as told by Luke, which we read last night. Or even the story as told by Matthew, because it includes the star of Bethlehem and these strange "magi" who come from afar to pay homage to Jesus.

These stories are a far cry from the way the Gospel of John tells Christmas story! All of the elements we want and expect from a holy encounter with God seem to be missing. There are no angels; there is no star; and the day and night of Jesus'

birth aren't even mentioned.

There is some great poetry here, and it's even better in Greek. We read about the "Word of God" and the great beginnings of creation. And we learn how the Word was with God and how indeed, the Word was God himself. But then, after all of this, even this great, spiritual poetry concludes with the phrase, "and the Word became flesh".

The Word became flesh. That was strange even to John's first readers. And it was strange because it was John's way of saying that God was most fully and really recognized not in angels or stars or silent nights, but in the common, everyday reality of God's creation. God had chosen to make himself known not so much in magical, spiritual moments, but by taking on the common, ordinary nature of God's own creation and making himself findable in a flesh and blood person.

Most of the time, "flesh" isn't such a good word in the New Testament. And that's because "flesh" is often associated with everything that's common and ordinary and fragile.

Yet it's in this actual world of "flesh" that we live. It's common, everyday existence that most of us can relate to. And it's the fragile nature of our lives that consumes most of our time and energy.

John's Christmas story doesn't give us stars and angels. And if we're looking for deep, other-worldly experiences like many pilgrims to the Holy Land are looking for, we may not find it in John's Christmas story. But John's Christmas story does give us Jesus. And John begins his story of Jesus by reminding us that the real message of Christmas isn't about angels or stars or silent nights. Instead, Jesus' birth is the good news that God:

- A) is present for us in our ordinary lives, not just in our extraordinary moments ...
- B) loves us – even our “fleshly” existence – so much that he has become intimately part of it ...
- C) even shares in our weakness and fragility – even so much that Jesus accepts death on a cross – in order to make it clear that God is with us to save us even in times and places that don't seem impressive to

anybody ...

It did occur to me as I traveled through the Holy Land that the Holy Land was much like every other land. And maybe that's part of the point. For in Jesus, God doesn't just draw close to us in far off, holy places, but in the ordinary reality of our everyday world. In Jesus, God doesn't just come to us among holy people, but in a world full of imperfect and sometimes difficult people, just like us. And in Jesus, God doesn't just save those who have extraordinary experiences. Instead, through Jesus, God comes to us "in the flesh" to love and save regular, ordinary people of every time and every place.

Amen.