

Reflection #7

Just a few miles from Jerusalem is the small, Palestinian town of Bethlehem. The town has a number of places for Pilgrims to visit. Perhaps the most important is the Church of the Nativity.

Built in the 4th century by the mother of Constantine, Helena, this church is perhaps the best preserved of the Byzantine churches. Worship has taken place in this sanctuary for nearly 1,700 years.

The goal of the pilgrim at the church is the “grotto”. The grotto is the small cave found beneath the chancel of the church. To reach the grotto you descend a set of winding stone steps. The grotto is the traditional site of the birth of Jesus.

As this is one of the most important pilgrim sites, there is often a long line.

But, it is good to wait here.

As you stand in line, the chances are you see a lot.



First you will see the pillars. The pillars are painted with frescoes of crusaders. Think 12th century.



Next you will notice the subfloor. The medieval floors have been excavated to reveal the early 4th century mosaics. This was likely the original floor.



And, then there are the walls of the transept. Here you will find Byzantine mosaics that were covered in plaster most likely so as not to offend Muslims or as part of the iconoclast controversy of the 9th century. Today the plaster is being removed to reveal beautiful images.



Lastly you will find tapes in bowls and a large icon. The tapers are there to light (for a small fee) and the icon is there for the Orthodox as part of their devotion.

Although I am not usually a big fan of standing in line, this is a really good place to move slowly, to observe, to look, and to wonder. The Church of the Nativity is not wild like the Church of the Holy Sepulchre or grand like the Church of the Annunciation. There is a quiet mystery. There is a sense of being gently led to something miraculous.

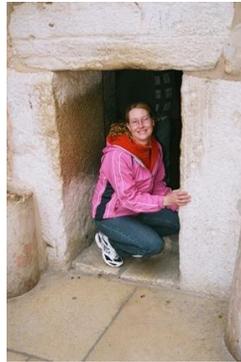


For instance, there are many places to light candles in the Holy Land. Yet, the Church of the Nativity is the place where I must light them. There is a sense of calm urgency. This may not be your experience. Yet, for me, the nativity is about birth and children and the hopes we cherish for children. These hopes draw you forward.

The Church of the Nativity also has the power of home. This is the home of our Christmas celebration. The sanctuary is built over the cave we think of as the manger. There was “no place for them in the inn” so they took shelter in a barn.

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 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 her 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.

Although the building has layers upon layers of history, it begs a very contemporary question. Do you believe God became flesh and dwelt among us? Other sites on our pilgrim path have provocative questions. Did Jesus really walk on the water? Was he resurrected and if so where? Each site has its own set of questions. Yet this one is so basic, so elemental, it should cause you to stop and ponder.



The need slow down, to pause, is even built into the church itself. The door to the church is known as the “door of humility.” It is a door only four feet high and thus you must bow your head before you enter. It is as if only the humble can approach the place where glory was emptied and became a babe wrapped in swaddling cloth.

As you walk slowly through the church and take in the many sights, you are also caused to pause by the aroma of the sanctuary. The incense is intense. The sanctuary is thick with it. The burning, pungent aroma is meant to alert you: You are entering another dimension of life.



After all the sights and smells, after the slow walk in line, you descend to the grotto. The cave floor is worn smooth by the hands of the faithful who have come to seek a blessing. There is a grill keeping the faithful from getting too close. This is one of the most important places on the pilgrim journey: Here was born the light of the world.



After all this, you emerge from the dark of the cave to a beautiful courtyard where you find a sculpture of St. Jerome. This is not only the site where Jesus was born; this is also the site where the Bible was translated into Latin, also known as the Vulgate. In a sense, this the birth of the Word and the bible. The Vulgate would be the Bible for more than a thousand years before the Protestants translated the Old and New Testament into common languages. This is the place where the bible as written in one language was born.

I would encourage you to consider a few things this week. Many people dream about going to the Holy Land, you are preparing for the journey. Is there someone in your family, your circle of friends, who cannot make this journey? Is there someone who would have loved to travel with you if only they had the opportunity or the physical ability? Take a few moment and write down names of people who are in essence traveling with you in spirit.

After you write down these names continue with the reflection.

When you travel to the Holy Land you will have people who pray for you. There will be people who wish they were with you. And there are people you've lost for whom this was a dream that you are living out. For these people I would encourage you to seek out the moments along the way to light candles. Keep the list of people you have written down and make sure you bring them into the sacred places as a candle of remembrance or a candle of joy. There may be people who are heavy on your heart as you travel. Add them to the list and be sure to let them join the pilgrimage as a candle lit in homage.

Yet also know that you are joining an ancient path. As you enter the church of the Nativity you are entering 2000 years of prayer. You are a pilgrim on a well-trod path. Consider lighting a candle also for those who went before you. Give thanks for the ones who shared their faith so you could be faithful; remember the ones who loved so you could be a loving person.

The pilgrim path is a moment where we step into many mysteries. Consider your steps carefully. Not in fear, in reverence. This is a great opportunity to see and understand the fabric of devotion that has led to your life. You can consider such at home today, but, trust me, it will be different when you descend the stairs to the spot of Jesus' birth.

Take time today to pause and find your breath. Walk the block and consider who might be traveling with you in spirit. Don't wait until the bus ride to Bethlehem.

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