

December 24, 2009

**The Nativity of Our Lord, Year C**

Luke 2:1-20

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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*And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David.)*

Think about Bethlehem for a moment. The birth we celebrate this night could have happened anywhere but, in a sense, it took place nowhere. Today Bethlehem is a Palestinian city in the middle of the ever-disputed West Bank. It has been sacked and destroyed and rebuilt through many invasions, changes of potentate and principality over the years. It was said to be the birthplace of King David of old and it draws such importance as it has today as a place of pilgrimage for Christians who remember it as the place of Jesus' birth. We would not be wrong if we said that Bethlehem was a backwater town, a kind of 'nowhere'. If Bethlehem is a kind of 'nowhere' then some stable, probably more like a cave hewn from rock, a place where animals could take shelter, and in which they were probably fed, --hence the manger—that is really nowhere upon nowhere. In Luke's story of Jesus' birth it is important that Jesus is of the house and lineage of the great king David. For us what is also important is Jesus was born in a specific place and not so much the place itself.

Where are you from? I imagine that some of you have traveled to be with family or friends this Christmas. Or perhaps you will be traveling later in the week. Some of you are a long way from home and others of you have come home. But I wonder how much the *place* you call home is really important, and whether 'home' is not more a state of mind.

When I think about 'home' it is all bound up with roots and family, places of belonging and loving and being loved. I sometimes find myself referring to England as 'home', but I'm not referring to a particular house or village as such. To sharpen the distinction: I will also refer to my parents' home or my brothers' homes and I know that those places are part of what I mean by 'home' but they are not mine specifically. When I am in England, I am quite clear that Atlanta is home, the place where I make my life, the place where I live. You've heard all the clichés. 'Home is where the heart is.' 'Home is where they have to take you in.' There is truth in all of them, but no cliché quite captures the fullness of what we mean when we know ourselves to be at home.

The specifics of place are overrated and almost certain to disappoint. When someone sells us on a holiday in Martinique or the Alps, they are selling an idea of luxury or something exotic--a feeling that we might be able to imagine we have in such a place, perhaps a sense that someone is taking care of us for a change.

Certainly that disparate group of slaves that fled Pharaoh and Egypt discovered that the Promised Land was not exactly as advertised. They had been formed into a people in the wilderness before finally crossing the Jordan and entering the Land of Promise. Scripture puts a pretty good face on it, but occupancy of that Land was disputed even then. This people persuaded those who were there before them that God wanted them to have the land by force and they never really won the hearts and minds of those they had invaded. When centuries later their leaders were captured and taken into exile, they dreamed of coming home. When it became possible for their descendents to return very few of them did because they had made their home in Babylon. Some had intermarried and raised children there.

Whatever their memories of Israel, Babylon had become home for many of them. Nonetheless the idea of home was as powerful and motivating for them as it is for any of us. When John the Baptist preached, he promised that valleys would be raised and mountains brought low, an image of an easy path over which people could travel at speed and in safety. The mighty act of God whose beginning we mark this night was going to bring people to their true home. This child, Jesus, was going to have nowhere to lay his head. He was born in no place and he lived no place in particular but he was going to be the way for the people of Israel and indeed for all people to know their true and lasting home. It is when we are able to put our whole trust in God's grace and love that we will know ourselves to be at home. When we live in peace with justice for all, then we will know ourselves to be at home. The promise of this night is that the way of Jesus is the way home. "Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we shall see face to face."

'Home' is being comfortable in our own skin, knowing who and whose we are, being prepared to take risks in the assurance that we are loved, knowing and telling the truth about ourselves because we know that we are fully known. It is no accident that this sense of 'home' sounds a lot like having faith in God: the Love that made us for Love.

For Christians specific places are not the clue. I read a book this year by a Yale professor called Lamin Sanneh<sup>1</sup>. One of his ideas is that Christianity, of all the religions of the book, has always found itself planted in whatever cultural soil in which the gospel is proclaimed. Islam looks to Mecca and Medina and pretty much requires that you speak Arabic. Judaism looks to Jerusalem and Israel and pretty much requires that you learn Hebrew. Even when some have tried to insist on our looking to Rome or becoming proficient in Latin, the faith kept on taking root all over the world. As our imaginative worlds changed with and Reformation and Renaissance, with Enlightenment and Modernism, with the New Science and multi-cultural societies, so our faith has endured as we re-tell our story in ways that make sense of it wherever we find ourselves. We can find the babe of Bethlehem wherever we are.

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<sup>1</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity* (Oxford, 2008)

So this Christmas may it be our joy and delight to relax and enjoy a taste of what it means to be 'home'. The first fruits of that promise are available to us wherever we find ourselves, in joy or sorrow, right here and right now. Taylor Swift is a singer who has been in the news this year. I came across her through the ministry of Saturday Night Live. She sings a song about unrequited love called "You belong with me" and at one point she sings to her beloved that she is 'dreaming about the day when you wake up and find that what you're looking for has been here all along.' That might be part of God's love song to each of us this night. Remember who you are and make yourself at home whether you think of yourselves as near to home or far from home. Keep the faith. Grow in your trust of God's love for you. The babe lying in the manger wrapped in swaddling clothes shall be a sign for you. Eat the bread and drink the wine and celebrate the love God has for you made manifest in the birth of the one with whom we find ourselves at home.