

*A Christmas meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Christmas Eve, December 24, 2010, 11 p.m. service, dedicated to Ruth Allred and all she does to care for members of our church, and always to the glory of God!*

## **“For Unto Us”**

### **Luke 2:1-20**

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Let us pray: Come by here Lord Jesus and open our hearts and minds to receive your gift of perfect love. Amen.

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The Christmas morning sun is rising in Bethlehem as we gather here tonight. Last night, pilgrims from all over the world came to Manger Square, lit candles, sang the songs of our faith in many languages, bent low to enter the Church of the Nativity, bent even lower to kiss the place where Jesus was born and once again recalled the story of the birth of our Savior.

Still, a small town with mostly Arab Muslims and slight mix of Palestinian Christians, people have come to Bethlehem to see “him whose birth the angels sing.” But there is not silence and peace filling Bethlehem in these hours of Christmas morning. Rather, there is a constant tension in the air of the West Bank of the Palestinian territory between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian citizens. Nevertheless, in the midst of violent skirmishes and rumors of war, people sing the songs of faith. They proclaim our story of hope just as Christians have done since 33 A.D. While we sing “*Angels We Have Heard on High Sweetly, Singing through the night,*” they cry out “*Come Lord Jesus. Come Soon!*”

The place of Jesus’ birth is an odd mix of every

imaginable Christian tradition. I know. I have seen with my own eyes the blend of Ethiopian, Armenian, Greek and Russian Orthodox, Franciscan and Roman Catholic layers of architecture, art and liturgy mixed in strange and magnificent ways.

How do I know? I know because on an extremely hot and dry Thursday afternoon in early August, I crawled into this church.

The entrance through which I crawled is called “The Door of Humility.” I stood and wiped off sand and dirt. In front of me rose the basilica’s high altar of gold, adorned with hundreds of oil burning gold and silver lamps, surrounded on all the walls by golden mosaics now mostly dimmed by time and smoke. Above a high ceiling of ancient wooden beams gave this sanctuary - one of three oldest in all of Christendom - the look and feeling of an ancient, golden barn. The basilica’s floor in front of me contained a series of trap doors which dropped several levels down revealing the original mosaics from 337 A.D.

**I had entered the 1,700-year-old Church of the Nativity.**

But this was only the foretaste of what I had come to behold. Below me, down in a cave I would find the place where our Savior was born. Down worn stone stairways I descended with other pilgrims into the Grotto of the Nativity. The floors were black stone and cracked marble. The grotto is a 10’ x 20’ cave with an 8-foot-high ceiling located directly beneath the basilica. Smelling like burnt oil and wet sand, the room is mostly dark – lit only by a few more layers of oil lamps hanging everywhere.

The “x” that marked the exact spot of Jesus’ birth is a 14-pointed silver star set into the marble floor and surrounded by more silver lamps. The hole in the center is 6 inches across and a quarter-inch deep. It feels waxy to the touch. It feels

ancient, too.

Here, our tradition tells us, God emptied himself into a newborn baby boy 2,000 years ago. Though late 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars contend that “Jesus of Nazareth” was born in Nazareth, as you bend low to pray in this place, the sense of the ages and the power of God’s presence is very much felt here.

Despite all the embellishments of this small chamber, the power and presence of God is in this holy place. It is a quite place in which everyone who enters does so in stillness, in peace, in serenity. When you kneel in this cave in Bethlehem, where Jesus was believed to have been born, where angels sang, parents gave thanks, shepherds and kings glorified God, you feel at peace.

If you get down low enough, you can hear a young woman offer, *“Here, would you like to hold my baby? He is brother. He is your Messiah! Here, hold him. Go ahead. It’s okay.”*

That God would bend down so low that we could take him in our arms and cradle the creator of the universe, that we could touch his holy light and follow it and bear it to all the world, a light shining in the darkness of this world – never to be put out – this is the wonder of all wonders. This is Christmas. This is the birth of our Lord. This is his nativity.

Tonight, as we witness in God’s word, in music and in silence, the nativity of our savior, I pray that each of us bend our heads and humble our hearts before the manger of God. May each of us hear again the words of the angels, “for unto us a child is born.” And may each of us lift his name on high as we welcome our newborn savior. Amen.

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