

*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, 7:30 p.m. service, dedicated to my daughter Sarah Ruth Sitler Ahrens, who plays Mary tonight in the Drama of the Nativity, to all the youth of First Church as they seek for the meaning and the place of Christ in their lives, and always to the glory of God!*

## **“Down Low”**

### **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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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 quiet 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 music and silent recollection the drama of the Nativity, I pray that each of us bend our heads and humble our hearts before the manger of God. Let us go down low to see him. Then, let us lift up high praise for our newborn savior! Amen.

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