



## The Cathedral of St. Andrew - Honolulu

### Sermon: Year C – Christmas Eve – December 24, 2018 Bustling Bethlehem

In 2014 I went to Jerusalem for the first time, after deciding to go there because my clergy colleagues who had been there on pilgrimage told me that my faith would never be the same after going to the Holy Land and walking in the footsteps of Jesus that I would never preach the in the same way again.

They were right. They were right, but not in the way that I thought they were going to be right.

My understanding of stories in the Bible always had a fairytale-like quality to them. But then I went to the Holy Land, and all that fairytale-like went away and I was left with the stark reality of what the scenes of those stories were like and they suddenly became really rather ordinary.

The site of the crucifixion of Jesus and the tomb, for example. I was imagining the grand and dramatic setting to that story but then I went to the actual site, only to discover that the cross and the tomb were only about thirty feet away from each other. That really surprised me. And in a way, I was sad to see that the story was really quite ordinary. It made me lose that childlike wonder that I had always had about all of it. But then again, it also made it so much more real, so much more believable. It was then that it hit me that it was all real and believable and that it was, therefore actually historical fact. And that was a gift.

And then one day on that trip, we got in our van and crossed the Israeli Separation Barrier and went into the West Bank and the town of Bethlehem.

I was very excited about that because, like so many of us, over the years I'd heard that very sweet song:

*Oh little town of Bethlehem  
How still we see the lie  
above thy deep and dreamless sleep  
The silent stars go by.*

I was expecting to go to Bethlehem to find a beautiful, idyllic Shangri-La. And, boy, was I ever surprised. Imagine my arriving in the town where Jesus was born. The first place we went out to was the Shepherd's Field where we walked along a chain-link fence and arrived at a set of caves that have been cast over in concrete and that had an electronic neon star flashing over it. And then afterwards, going into a huge multi-story parking garage that had a sign that said "Escalator to the Church of the Holy Nativity." And then walking up a steep hill as vendors pushed their wares into me to try to get me to buy little trinkets – rosaries, statues, postcards--and then to go right by a store with a huge sign that said "John the Baptist Souvenir Shop!"

## Christmas Eve – December 24, 2018, cont'd.

And then to arrive at the front of the church itself with countless tour buses at its main entrance and pilgrims speaking, all these different languages, and tour guides arguing with security guards about who was supposed to line up where and at what door and then shouting those instructions to pilgrims over megaphones.

And then to get into the church itself and taking in the din of the throngs of pilgrims' shoulders jostling about and speaking in different languages that reverberated off the church's walls and high ceilings.

And then to knock about in between all those pilgrim shoulders and to make my way down the set of stairs that went underneath the high altar of the church, the high altar were priests celebrate Mass over the purported site of Jesus's birth.

Here I was in one of the most sacred sites in the world and was I feeling spiritual? Absolutely not. All I was at that point was frustrated and irritated. But then we bear in mind the persistence of God and God's long to be in relationship with us through spiritual connection. Which is the whole point of Christmas, after all, God wanting to connect by sending God's son into the world to be in relationship with us. Nothing was going to undermine that.

So, I went down into that cave in that church and under that altar and lined up and knelt down and kissed the piece of glass over the sacred spot where Jesus was born. And then to avoid the crowds I made my way over to a small side cave where I felt an almost electric jolt and a magnetic force grounding me to the rock that was underneath my feet, only to look up at a sign that told me that I was standing in the spot where they laid the Christ child in the manger.

I stood there for a couple of minutes and then turned and walked back through all the people, but it was like I didn't even notice they were there because I was in some kind of different teleported spiritual realm. And when I got up to the top of the stairs and entered back into the main church I had tears in my eyes for a reason that I couldn't even express in words to you tonight. All I can say is that the story that we just read during the gospel procession this evening transcended my intellect and landed on my heart.

The birth of Jesus Christ in that cave over 2000 years ago changed the world. And I cannot think of another person in history who has had such a profound effect on our lives—even 2000 years later and after the fact.

Quite often I sit on my lanai in the mornings to watch the sunrise over Punchbowl crater and I ask myself as I look down on the city of Honolulu, what would our world be like today if Jesus had never been born in that cave in Bethlehem 2000 years ago. What would our lives in this city be like?

And as you go from this to the Cathedral and back into the world and into your lives, I invite you to think about that. What would the city of Honolulu be like today if Jesus had never been born. How was the world made different by that one solitary life that came into being in that manger halfway across the world?

As you listen to these readings, and this sermon, and these beautiful Christmas carols, and as you come forth for the bread and the wine (the body and blood), and as you gaze upon the beautiful decorations and this Cathedral this evening, don't let the wonder of it all end here. I beg you, I implore you to take that wonder with you out from here and into your lives and allow what

## **Christmas Eve – December 24, 2018, cont'd.**

happened in that manger to continue to make a difference in our world as we strive for kindness, compassion, justice, and peace.

That will be a gift before the Christ child greater than any frankincense, gold, or myrrh. It'll be a greater gift, because it will be the gift of yourself and that in the end, that all God really wants – you just as you are. If we can do that, then this will truly be a very Merry Christmas.

God bless you all.

*Amen.*