

ST BART'S



A Sermon by:

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The Christmas Grotto

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, December 29, 2013
The First Sunday after Christmas Day—Based on John 1:1-18*

Merry Christmas! A few years ago, I took a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. And one of our stops included Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus. It was a bright spring day, and our group made our way through the checkpoints and the small city to the Church of the Nativity, a complex of churches built where it is said Jesus was born. It is quite a place. One of the oldest churches still standing in the world, and it shows. There are many beautiful things and stories there, but the most powerful part of the complex is the grotto of the Nativity, a cave under the main altar. This cave is covered in lush patterned cloth, and has another altar there, installed in the rock, with candles and icons. And under that altar is a striking silver disc, actually a silver hole through which you may touch the rock below. Not only birthplace, but the birth spot! Now I didn't try to put my hand in the hole. It was too dark for my taste. But, like most pilgrims would do, I did kneel down, and kiss the silver disc, a sign of devotion and gratitude and love, like any kiss. This was part of a communion service that a Franciscan priest led for our group and others. The intensity of symbols all on top of one another was potent: the place of Christ's birth, the signs of Christ's ministry, the bread and wine meal that has persisted across the centuries, feeding us with the loving presence that conquered death. There was something so electric about the place, not like lightning, but like the deep, low hum of a power station that hangs in the air, giving light and life so much that is beyond itself.

Soon after this, our guide took our band of pilgrims to another place in Bethlehem, leading us on a bright, rocky path out in the open, and then he descended into a large hole in the rock and helped us all, one by one, into another cave, another grotto. One of thousands of ancient cave homes that would be found in the time of Mary and Joseph. But this one, unlike the so-called "real" birthplace, this cave was preserved. A small bubble carved into the white rock, with an entrance for people, and a small hole in the ceiling for the smoke from the fire to escape. The fire pit was carved in the center. And this was not only a home for people, far more people than we would expect in such a small place, but it was also a home for animals. For there, carved out of the floor of the cave, was a raised basin, a basin for animal food, a manger. This wasn't the official birth spot, but for me, standing inside that spare cave, I was able to see things that no nativity set could bear to portray. I saw the fire and the people huddled in its light, I smelled the smoke and the stench, I heard the cries of the mother, and then the cries of the baby, among all the humans and the animals and the exhausted mother far from friends and family all crammed together that first Christmas night. I could see the hands scrambling to clean out all the slop in the manger to have somewhere to place the child, somewhere to keep it safe, where it could live and cry.

The Grotto at the Church of the Nativity, ornate and well appointed, gave me a taste of the mystical, timeless truth of Christmas. But this cave, the same as so many other caves, gave me a taste of the nitty-gritty, painful, and all-too-real truth of a poor teenager's hard birth away from home and without a place to stay. And although we would never wish such a dark and desperate place for anyone to have a child, this cave was what was given. A filthy cave like this was the place of kindness that made the birth of Jesus possible.

Because the thing we discover about God at Christmas is that when God is made real, God is so very vulnerable. God doesn't do it alone. Not by a long shot. God takes a risk on us. If it weren't for the kindness of a dirty cave, Christ's work may never have begun. So the question for us in our day is, do

we have this kind of kindness? Do we have the space in our hearts and in our cramped lives for God to have a safe place to rest and grow?

I hope so. For if God has any chance of changing our world, God must take shelter in human lives. It was the hospitality of unclean cave-dwellers that made room for a process (hoped-for since the beginning of time) to be actually lived out. Like our unlocking the power of the atom that was there all along, the power of God has been there all along, waiting to be born. This is what we mean when we read every Christmas that in the beginning was the Word and the Word became flesh and lived among us. In the full scope of this baby's life, powerful principles have moved from the spiritual realm to our material world. In this birth, God's spirit has come out of the dreams of the hopeful, out of the visions of the prophets, out of the text of the Scriptures, and actually was lived to the hilt by this baby, in a way that could be passed on to anyone, through simple words and simple things like bread and wine and water, into real lives like ours.

If we, like the owners of that dirty cave, make room for the life of this baby in our bruised hearts, if we keep tabs on him throughout the new year, if we imitate him in hope, great things will start to grow in us. Our lives will change for the better. History will change for the better. History, made up of lives like ours, will be transformed and renewed by lives that follow in the footsteps of this baby. This is what we mean when we read every Christmas that God gave us "power to become children of God, born not of blood or of the will of the flesh, but of God." It means that we live lives that don't rely on desperate hoarding of what we have. But lives of hope lived as a gift to those around us, both friend and stranger. Not lives that rely on the power gained from drawing lines between nations and races and classes and genders and the good and the evil. But lives that actually blur those lines, healing so much of the damage done by them. Not callous lives built on the forced servitude of those around us, and not fearful lives secured by the threat of violence. But supremely vulnerable lives of freedom and peace that are built on foundations of truth and love, that nothing, not even death, can destroy. This new way of living is hardly new. This way has been with us since the beginning of Creation, waiting for us to live it.

When I climbed out of that cave in Bethlehem and walked some distance away, I turned around and saw nothing but a rocky landscape. But I knew that the cave was there, a deep and hidden home of welcome for God. If I could give you one gift this Christmas, it would be the assurance that no matter what is on the surface of your lives, on the surface of your heart, no matter how barren it may be, that there, since the world began, has always been a deep and hidden place for God to be born in you.