

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah

Bethlehem as Sacred Place©

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. (Micah 5:2)

Roger Wharton

March 25, 1992

The Feast of the Annunciatio

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah

The Hebrew people encountered God in many diverse places and circumstances. At Bethel, Jacob dreamed of a ladder reaching from earth to heaven with the angels of God ascending and descending on it (Gen 28) On Mt. Sinai (known in some traditions at Mt. Horeb), God revealed his name to Moses and called on him to deliver the Hebrews from bondage in Egypt (Exodus 3). It was on Mt. Sinai, too where Moses received the Ten Commandments (Exodus 34). The wilderness of Sinai, was where the newly freed slaves wandered for forty years. These places were considered special and holy, and worthy to be commemorated as seen in the following scriptural citations.

On waking from his dream, Jacob built a stone pillar and called that place "the House of God".

Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place-- and I did not know it!" And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel. (Gen 28:16-19a)

The Hebrew Scripture is filled with place names and signify important and holy events.

Moses was told by God that the very ground was holy and that it should be revered.

When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." (Exodus 3: 3-4)

God tells Moses that he and the Hebrews he shall help free from the slavery should come to this mountain to worship thereby recognizing and honoring this sacred place.

He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain." (Exodus 3:12)

When Moses came down from Mt. Sinai, the people were so grateful for the revelation of God that they built a splendid and exquisite tabernacle and ark of the covenant to house the stone tablets.

All who are skillful among you shall come and make all that the LORD has commanded: the tabernacle, its tent and its covering, its clasps and its frames, its bars, its pillars, and its bases; the ark with its poles, the mercy seat, and the curtain for the screen; the table with its poles and all its utensils, and the bread of the Presence; the lamp stand also for the light, with its utensils and its lamps, and the oil for the light; and the altar of incense, with its poles, and the anointing oil and the fragrant incense, and the screen for the entrance, the entrance of the tabernacle; the altar of burnt offering, with its grating of bronze, its poles, and all its utensils, the basin with its stand; the hangings of the court, its pillars and its bases, and the screen for the gate of the court; the pegs of the tabernacle and the pegs of the court, and their cords; the finely worked vestments for ministering in the holy place. (Exodus 35:10-19a)

This tabernacle and ark of the covenant traveled with the Israelites but Mt. Sinai remained as a holy mountain and guiding landmark during their wandering through the wilderness.

When the forty years of wandering in the wilderness came to an end, Joshua lead the people through the Jordan River, which stopped flowing when the priests bearing the ark of the covenant stepped into the water. Thus the people were able to cross on dry ground. This miraculous crossing was commemorated in the following way:

When the entire nation had finished crossing over the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua: "Select twelve men from the people, one from each tribe, and command them, 'Take twelve stones from here out of the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the priests' feet stood, carry them over with you, and lay them down in the place where you camp tonight.'" (Joshua 4:1-3) Those twelve stones, which they had taken out of the Jordan, Joshua set up in Gilgal, saying to the Israelites, "When your children ask their parents in time to come, 'What do these stones mean?' then you shall let your children know, 'Israel crossed over the Jordan here on dry ground.' For the LORD your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you crossed over, as the LORD your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we crossed over, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the LORD is mighty, and so that you may fear the LORD your God forever." (Joshua 4:20-24)

Not only were holy places marked with stone pillars and various types of shrines as shown above, but their location was recorded in oral history and in the holy scripture of the Israelites.

As the religion of the wandering Israelites developed into a religious state set within borders of the promised land and Judaism became institutionalized, wilderness holy places became less important, for two reasons. First, God's revelation was understood increasingly as a revelation of action in history for the benefit of the Hebrew people. With this new concept of history came a de emphasis on the sacredness of place. Holy places where the living encounter with God had taken place, were replaced by historical sites designating human events Secondly, the priestly clan attempted to consolidate power on the Holy Mountain, and the kings desired to centralize rule in Jerusalem. This caused the destruction of many pre-Israelite hill shrines and even the deconsecration of some Hebrew holy places. Yet the idea of holy place lived on in the hearts of the people as they struggled to maintain particular holy sites for inspiration. This concept lives on today not only among some Jews, but also among some of the Christians who share this early heritage with their Jewish brothers and sisters.

Well before the Christian era, the ritual attention of most of Judaism was focused on one sacred place on Mt. Moriah where the temple built by Solomon stood. It was here that the grain and blood sacrifices required by Jewish law took place. Mt. Moriah had a long history as a place of God's revelations. It is to this mountain that Abraham took Isaac for sacrifice.

He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you." (Gen 22:2)

After testing Abraham's faith and obedience, God leased Abraham from this command and provided a ram to replace Isaac on the altar. It is here that God renews the promise made to Abraham and Sarah of a nation of offspring living in a nation of their own.

From this beginning, Moriah becomes the center of Jewish cultic worship. Here God shows David to build the temple which is built by this son Solomon.

Solomon began to build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the LORD had appeared to his father David, at the place that David had designated, on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite. (II Chronicles 3:1)

Solomon built a magnificent temple on the summit of what is now Jerusalem. The temple was destroyed in 586 BC by King Nebuchadrezzar II of Babylon. Fifty years later the people began the rebuilding of the temple on the same sacred place. This second temple was destroyed in 70 AD and has never been rebuilt. Archeological excavations uncovered the wall of the temple complex. This wall is known as the Wailing Wall and is an important place of pilgrimage for the Jewish people. Orthodox Jews will not travel into the temple complex for fear of trespassing on the most holy space known as the Holy of Holies which was the innermost chamber of the temple.

This most holy mountain became the location of the central mystery of Christianity, as the place of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is also a holy place to Islam, for it is here that the Prophet Mohammed ascended into heaven on a winged steed and received the revelation of the central creeds of Islam (Bernbaum 1990, 90). The temple site which became Muslim territory soon after the fall of Rome is now covered by the Mosque of the Omar also known as the Mosque of the Rock.

Another hill which is geologically very closely related to Mt. Moriah connected by a south running ridge of about five miles became a sacred place for Christians. For on this hill is the town known as Bethlehem, the Messiah was born. The city sits on two hills of the ridge that forms the watershed between the Mediterranean and the Dead Sea. Bethlehem had been the home of the shepherd David who became the greatest king of Israel and an ancestor of Jesus. It was to this hill that God directed the prophet Samuel to go in order to find the young David and to anoint him the chosen one to succeed Saul as king.

The LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons." (I Samuel 16:1)

Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. (I Samuel 16:13a)

Bethlehem was expected to become a very special holy place, because it had long been prophesied to be the birth place of the coming Messiah.

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth

for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. (Micah 5:2)

The evangelist Matthew tells us that it was indeed in Bethlehem that the Messiah was born.

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea. (Matthew 2:1a)

Christians even before the writing of Matthew's Gospel have honored Bethlehem as the birth place of the Messiah. Recently, Christian scholars have questioned not only the birthplace of Jesus but also many aspects of his life and ministry. For the purposes of this paper, it does not matter whether Jesus was born at Bethlehem or not. What matters is that Bethlehem and the Church of the Holy Nativity have been set aside as sacred places, and that the Creator uses these places to reveal his/her love to the people. The account of the establishment of these holy places and my personal experience there is what follows.

There are three classifications of holy places in Christian tradition. Each type brings it own special qualities to the sacred site. First, there are historic holy places that can be verified by historical accounts or archaeological evidence. The village of Bethlehem falls within this category. The second classification is that of traditional holy sites. These sites that cannot be scientifically verified as historical sites, but they have been connected to specific events by Christians for a long time and have acquired deep spiritual meaning. For example, Bethlehem as the birthplace of Jesus cannot be verified historically this a traditional site. Other examples of a traditional sites would be the actual place of Christ's birth, the location of his manger in the cave, and the Shepherd's Field where his birth was announced to the shepherds by the angels. The third classification is that of pious sites. These are places that for various pious reasons have been associated with biblical events but are neither historical or traditional. The best known of these to Christians is Gordon's Calvary and tomb of Jesus. This current pious site, established in recent history, is visited by thousands of pilgrims each day because it fits the biblical descriptions of the burial place of Jesus, although it cannot be verified and traditionally the church has recognized and honored another site about a half mile away enclosed with the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

Bethlehem is located on a ridge about five miles south of Jerusalem. It is three thousand feet above the Mediterranean Sea to the west and more than four thousand feet above the level of the Dead Sea to the east. From the top of the ridge looking east can be seen the Mountains of Moab and of course Jerusalem and Mt. Zion (Perowne 1976, 15).

The Christian cult of the first centuries was not popular with the Hebrew government, institutional Judaism, or the Roman Empire. Therefore all three groups did their best to wipe out all possible traces of all historical sites that were associated with the political martyr Jesus. When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine in 324 AD, not many of the original sites associated with the life and ministry of Jesus remained. Mt. Calvary and the Holy Sepulchre had been leveled by Roman engineers on order of Hadrian after the Jewish revolt in 132 AD in hopes that people

would soon forget the crucifixion of the carpenter from Nazareth that took place there (De Sandoli ,19).

Constantine's mother Helena, traveling in Palestine in 326 AD ordered that a church be built over the place of the birth of Christ. She also located, protected, and revered many other Christian holy places. Even though centuries had passed since the death of Jesus, sacred sites were not difficult to locate because the persecuted Christians had passed on their location in oral tradition from generation to generation (Petozzi. 30). The Roman government under Hadrian (76 - 138) had also ironically helped to preserve the location of the very sites it hoped to destroy by building temples and shrines over them. The birthplace in Bethlehem was marked by a shrine of Adonis, making it very easy to locate (Perowne 1976, 16-17). Since the time of Helena, the site of Christ's birth has been honored with a church which has been built modified over the centuries.

Although in Christian thought Bethlehem is the birthplace of the Prince of Peace, it has not been a peaceful place. It has been fought over for centuries including during the crusades and in the 1967 War. Today there is contention of ownership between Israel and the POL. Perhaps this fact is further testimony to the depth of meaning people attach to sacred places. Yet in spite of all this conflict, the sacred place of the birth of the Christ has remained a place where God's love is made known to human kind in the rituals and celebrations that take place there. There is a daily procession which had its origins in the 15th century (Petrozzi 1971, 126) and the annual Christmas Eve celebration when thousands of pilgrims gather in the church and town squares. Less public the personal revelations given to the pilgrims who follow the star throughout the centuries.

If such a thing is possible the sacredness of Bethlehem was enhanced in the 5th century, when it was chosen as the place for study and work by the scholar Jerome (385 - 419) for the translation of Jewish and Christian sacred texts into the Latin Vulgate Bible. In this holy place where Christians believe the Word became flesh,

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (Jn. 1:14)

the word was translated so that the people who were not educated in Greek and Hebrew could have access to the Good News of what God had accomplished in Christ Jesus (Lupton 1988, 41). The selection of Bethlehem for this work may again be an indication of its sacred nature because sacred places are often the site of ongoing revelations and spiritual work.

Although it has been the Christian way to enclose sacred places with churches and buildings, Bethlehem remains unique in that it also preserves one of a few outdoor Christian holy sites. Located about two miles down the hill from the Church of the Holy Nativity are a field and cave, the traditional site where the angels announced the birth of Christ to the shepherds abiding in their field by night. Sheep still graze in this field.

The small modern day city sits on the transition zone of semi-arid cultivated land and the desert that

drops down to the lowest place on the earth, the Dead Sea. What follows is an account of a personal encounter with this sacred place and how it has affected me.

My Personal Encounter with this Holy Place

The out-of-doors has always been important to me. As a child I was fortunate in living next to a large vacant field and small pine plantation. Wood lots were also scattered throughout my neighborhood. I spent a great deal of time playing and growing up in these natural playgrounds. Insects fascinated me, and formed my introduction in the exciting world of nature. As an elementary student, I was catching and identifying insects for high school biology students.

The spiritual connection to the natural wonder and awe was cultivated by many summer church camping experiences and Boy Scout trips. When I was fourteen, I began to spend the whole summers working as a camp counselor. At the camps I instinctually discovered places of power. In each camp I discovered those places that were especially spiritual for me. These places ranged from a grove of tulip trees, hill tops, to a place tucked away on the edge of a pine plantation.

Nurtured by the out-of-doors, I felt a calling while in high school to become a biology and environmental education teacher. After teaching for a few years, I experienced a calling to the ordained ministry and went off to Nashotah House Seminary, which was tucked away in southern Wisconsin on the shore of a lake and surrounded by trees. Here my seminary education was enhanced by swimming, hiking, skiing, sleeping out, camping, collecting edible plants, tree planting and making maple syrup on the seminary grounds. I also found my personal sacred places scattered around the lake and throughout the woods.

As a newly ordained Episcopal priest, I was sent off to remote northern Wisconsin which was delightful for me. Here in the midst of natural forests, lakes, and wildlife, my formation continued with the help of the folks in my parishes. It was not long, however, before I realized that my spiritual connection and communion with the natural world were not understood by many other Christians, especially not those in leadership positions. This led me to study with Matthew Fox for a year at the Institute for Creation-Centered Spirituality in Chicago. It was here that theological reflection and language were added to my own nature- inspired Christianity and sense of the holy.

From that point on, whether serving parishes in New York or Alaska, a great deal of what I preached included inspiration from the natural world and the call to be ecologically sensitive Christians. My own experiences and education led me to develop a special outdoor environmental ministry called Wilderness Manna. By leading many wilderness trips, I realized what a powerful place the wilderness can be for teaching, inspiration, and changing lives. I experienced first-hand the need for many Christians to integrate their outdoor and nature mystical experiences with Christianity. My understanding of the power of place was enhanced by a pilgrimage to Israel in 1984.

The first week was spent with a tour group traveling quickly around the country visiting the various holy sites. The second week I spent alone retracing my steps to these locations and seeking out new sites of interest. I visited Bethlehem during both segments. On tour, the visit was quick and even though it was low tourist season the place did not have much of an opportunity to influence me. My return visit, however, was very significant as I was enfolded in the mystery of the birth of the Christ.

I arrived in Bethlehem by Arab bus from Jerusalem and proceeded to the Church of the Holy Nativity. There were few tour groups and even fewer individual pilgrims in the church when I arrived. I spent some time in the grotto with various tour groups from different countries enjoying the singing of Silent Night in various languages. This is a tradition of visitors to the shrine. Eventually everyone left and no new people arrived. I was alone in this sacred place, able to pray in my own way without self-consciousness. I knelt at the silver Star of Bethlehem which surrounds a hole in the floor that marks the "very spot" on earth where it is believed the Christ was born of the God Bearer, Mary. The silver star is a replica of the one placed there in 1717. The original star disappeared in mysterious circumstances in 1847. This theft along with other causes lead to the Crimean War (Becker 1973, 60). I was able to place my own silver cross of the Order of the Holy Nativity on that place, making a connection that I would carry with me until this very day.

Surprised that no one yet entered, I moved to the site of the manger, where once again I was able to pray in my own way, recalling the masculine role of Joseph and the presence of the animals at the birth. It was a minor miracle that I was able to spend so much time alone in this very busy shrine touched by the power of place and the hope of peace on earth. The internal experience was one of opening and peace and feeling enfolded in a wonderful mystery. I was to learn that the Spirit had more in store for me on this holy hill.

On leaving the church, I next sought out the Field of the Shepherds. After several inquiries I hired a taxi to take me the few miles down the hill to the traditional site of the shepherd's fields. It was in this field that the news of the birth of the Christ was first announced by angels to shepherds who were tending their flocks by night. The Good News or Gospel was therefore first proclaimed to the earth at this place not only to the shepherds but also to the sheep and all other plants and animals on the hillside. It was from the cave a short way up the hill that the New Creation was to pour forth, rolling down the mountain filling the whole cosmos.

I arrived just as the final tourists were loading on to a bus. I entered the gate of this less visited site, again encompassed in the mystery of solitude giving thanks for the gift of being alone in such a sacred site. As I walked down the path I looked skyward and was greeted by a large flock of migrating storks who had stopped their migration to circle overhead. For a moment as I gazed upward, time was transcended. I was now standing in the field on the night of the birth of the Christ and angels were flying overhead proclaiming the Good News.

It came upon the midnight clear,
That glorious song of old,

From angels bending near the earth
To touch their harps of gold:
"Peace on the earth, good will to men,
From heav'n's all gracious King."
The world in solemn stillness lay
To hear the angels sing.

Still through the cloven skies they come
With peaceful wings unfurled,
And still their heav'nly music floats
O'er all the weary world;
Above its sad and lowly plains
They bend on hov'ring wing,
And ever ov'er its Babel-sounds
The blessed angels sing!

It Came Upon the Midnight Clear
Once again I was blessed by being enveloped in the great mystery.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see-- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people:

to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" (Luke 2: 8 -14)

The storks flew on and the angels departed, leaving me alone there on the hillside. For some reason no one else visited this sacred site for over the next two hours, except for one couple who stopped briefly before rushing back to their waiting taxi. This solitude permitted me once again to pray in my own ways and to make a good pilgrimage to the field, cave, and gardens of this sacred place. I was touched by the gift that had been given to me, and found a deep inner peace of being able to meditate in this outdoor holy place for the Field of the Shepherds is one of the very few holy sites that has not been covered by churches and buildings.

Several years later I have come to appreciate the appearance of the storks at Bethlehem. I have learned some of the ancient Christian symbolism that is associated with this bird which in a way has made my experience that much more powerful in retrospect. During the Christmas season while listening to National Public Radio I was surprised to hear of a Christmas poem about a stork.

A poem was found written by hand on the overleaf of the 1549 Book of Common Prayer of one of the kings of England which has not been found anyplace else. It is not known if it was written by the owner of the prayer book, or whether the king copied it down from a sermon or other source. The poem tells the story of a stork who hears the Good News of the birth of the Christ Child and wants to pay homage to the child. Being a good parent, it makes sure that his/her chicks are tucked into their nest and have enough food before flying off to Bethlehem. It arrives at the stable and finds the wonderful child lying in a manger. The manger is lined with scratchy straw, which the stork thinks must be uncomfortable for the baby. To soften his bed, the stork plucks his/her own feathers to line the nest with soft down before flying home. This stork story made the migrating storks of Bethlehem seem that much more special to me.

The Bestiary of Christ in the chapter on wading birds helps to fill in more of the mystery of the stork. The stork, like other wading birds, shares a symbolism of good struggling with evil (Charonnequ-Lassay 1991, 267 -273).

The wading birds are also often connected with the ideals of wisdom and guidance. In certain Asiatic regions, the stork is thought to have strange powers of insight which enable it to see clearly the state of each person's conscience. Very old traditions also connect waders with divine wisdom. Wisdom is nearly always identified with the divine Word for Christians. Thus the stork as a symbol of wisdom can also be understood as a token for the Word. The Word for Christians as expressed in the prologue to John's Gospel is Christ.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1 - 14))

Thus the appearance of the storks to me in the Shepherd's Field was, in a sense, Christ himself. Not only does the Stork Christ speaks of its birth but also, following the Egyptian resurrection symbolism of the ibis and its connection to Osiris, it takes on the same symbolic role of speaking of resurrection and new birth. The storks circling overhead not only announce the birth of the Jesus but also speak to the inauguration of the New Creation that is to follow in the Resurrection of the Christ.

The stork in the Shepherd's Field played the role for me of a messenger from God. This role of messenger, in many cultures, is often given to birds - especially large high flying birds. I didn't receive a worded message. I experienced a deep peace, inspiration, and an opening for what was to follow.

My Spirit experience was not yet finished. It was getting late and I needed to return to the Bethlehem town square to catch the last bus back to Jerusalem. My solitude at the site has been wonderful, but I had expected to catch a tour bus or taxi back up the hill, but there were none around. I am forced, therefore, to walk up the hill to Bethlehem. Soon I realize that I am retracing the steps of the shepherds to the Christ Child. The drudgery vanishes. The walk becomes a pilgrimage in the deepest sense, and I give thanks to the Spirit again for presenting me with such a unique experience. I walk from the field to the Church of the Holy Nativity sharing the excitement of the shepherds on that most holy night.

I arrive in time to catch the next to last Arab bus back to the city but my Spirit experience is still not over. On the short three-mile ride to Jerusalem, our Arab bus is stopped at a Israeli roadblock. Armed soldiers enter the bus asking for identification papers. I was scared because I did not have my identification papers on me. Fortunately as a tourist I was not asked for them. It was only the Arabs who were being queried. Here I was a short distance from the birthplace of the Prince of Peace, being reminded that there still was much work to do to bring into fullness the peace of the New Creation. I had been gifted in very special ways, and now I was reminded in a very concrete way that life involved more than just mystical experience. Christian life also means striving for justice and peace among all people and respecting the dignity of every human being (Baptismal Covenant, 1979 Book of Common Prayer, 305.).

The power of place continues to work in my life. As I retell this story, I am struck once again with the power of the experience and the teaching of the Spirit. I am given new breath and inspiration to continue my life and ministry in hopes that I can help others experience the connection with the Mystery of God which is experienced in sacred places both indoors and out-of-doors.

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