



# DIOCESE OF THE MISSOURI VALLEY



**Anglican Church in America**

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Christmas 2011

## **Christmas Greetings to all!**

In October 2010, I was fortunate enough to visit the Church of the Holy Nativity in Bethlehem, the oldest church in the Holy Land still in use. Holy Nativity is an Orthodox Church that marks the traditional place of Christ's birth. The trip to the Holy Land remains one of the greatest experiences of my life. Yet, as it is with life in general, it was not without disappointments. One such disappointment was my visit to Holy Nativity. In reality the visit resulted in a paradoxical feeling. On one hand, I was very excited to be standing in the Church courtyard. It was even more exciting to be able to be inside the ancient Church. On the other hand, I was disappointed with the crowd both outside and inside. For some reason, when we were there, Bethlehem was almost over run with the crowd of tourists. When we reached Holy Nativity we were greeted with a huge crowd with long lines to get in to see the birthplace of Jesus. Steve Ger, our tour leader said that he had never seen such a crowd in all the years he has led tours to the Holy Land. This was quite unusual. We never found out why there was such a crowd that year.

In my mind, leading up to the trip, I had envisioned kneeling at the Altar of the Holy Nativity while looking at the marble floor beneath the Altar where, fitted into the paving, shines a 14 pointed silver star marking the exact spot surrounded by the Latin inscription: *HIC DE VIRGINE MARIA JESUS CHRISTUS NATUS* (translated means *Here Jesus Christ was born to the Virgin Mary*). Unfortunately, Steve had only allowed for two hours at the Church. In every previous trip, two hours was plenty of time for everyone not only to kneel and pray at the manger, but to look around this magnificent Church. That would not be the case this time. After standing in line over two hours we had to leave. That was very disappointing. But there was a sliver of good news. Our Palestinian guide (whom we picked up at the gates of Bethlehem) knew one of the sextons at Holy Nativity. So he was able to arrange for our group to be taken around to a small opening leading to a narrow hallway to the right of the Altar of the Nativity. There, we were able to look through a tiny hole in the wall (not much bigger than a pin head) and get a brief glimpse of the spot where Jesus was born. So I bent over and peeped through the tiny hole to see the spot where Christ our Savior was born. The paradox is found in my disappointment at not being able to kneel and pray there, while at the same time humbled and thankful that I was able to be there and to see the place where God humbled himself to be born of a virgin.

Months later, as I looked at the photos, I remembered both the disappointment at not being able to kneel at the Altar of the Nativity and the excitement and thankfulness at just being there and being able to see it at all, even if only through a peep hole. I also thought about how St. Joseph and Mary the Mother of God must have felt when they entered Bethlehem on that cold night. Just like our group, I am sure St. Joseph didn't expect to see the multitudes of people, some sleeping in the streets. I am sure he expected to get a room at the inn where Mary could give birth. Yet, it was so crowded that there was no room for them. Yet God had already made provision. The owner of the inn offered a cave as the only option left. St. Joseph thankfully took him up on the offer. As they entered the cave, I can almost imagine the disappointment of St. Joseph at not being able to "provide" for her

while at the same time thankful that God had “provided” a safe place for them and for the birth of Jesus, the greatest gift God could give them, and the greatest gift for the whole world and for all ages.

As we consider the wonder of it all during this most Holy Season, may we contemplate the fact that, while there may be disappointments in life, we have reason for excitement and humble thankfulness because “*The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us*” thus beginning the process of our redemption. And what is equally exciting is that He still dwells with us today in His visible Body, the Church, which is the prolongation of his Incarnation where we abode with Him as the day of our redemption draws nearer and nearer. As we make our preparations for Christmas, I pray that God will assist us to not only celebrate the birth of Jesus, but help us to understand that in His birth, God became man and thus began the process of our redemption through His Son.

May God bless you throughout the Christmas and Epiphany Seasons.

+Stephen D. Strawn

II Bishop of the Missouri Valley  
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