

December 25, 2025  
Christmas Day  
Trinity, St. Louis  
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

*Isaiah 62:6-12*

*Psalm 97*

*Titus 3:4-7*

*Luke 2:8-20*

In the Name of God, whose coming we adore. Amen.

On this quiet Christmas morning, I am reminded of some familiar words.

*How silently, how silently,  
The wondrous gift is given;  
So God imparts to human hearts  
The blessings of His heaven.*

These famous words were written by Phillips Brooks, then Rector of Boston's Trinity Church, for his Sunday School. They were a remembrance of having spent Christmas, 1866, at Bethlehem.

This morning, I want to remember with you another Christmas at Bethlehem, this one 119 years later, in 1985. In that year, I found myself leading a college choir from the Twin Cities on a tour of the Holy Land. The tour/pilgrimage was filled with sightseeing and singing, including church services in Nazareth and Jerusalem, and a performance with the Jerusalem Philharmonic.

1985 was before the First Intifada,<sup>1</sup> and tourist travel in Israel was still relatively easy. In those days, Bethlehem, home to one of the largest Palestinian Christian communities in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, pulled out all the stops for Christmas – with extravagant decorations and marching bands of Boy Scouts playing carols. On Christmas Eve, we sang at the International Choir Festival in Manger Square. We even had a brief live appearance on the CBS Evening News.

After that, the plan was to attend Midnight Mass at the Roman Catholic Church of St. Catherine, which shares a wall with the Orthodox Basilica of the Nativity. It was going to be the high point of our trip – a big liturgy in a big church in that little town of Bethlehem.

At what felt like the 11<sup>th</sup> hour, we were told that "somebody" had forgotten to acquire the necessary tickets. Imagine the disappointment. There we were, all of us

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<sup>1</sup> Dec 9, 1987 – Sep 13, 1993.

away from home (some for the first time), in Bethlehem, and there was no room for us...in the church.

I can't remember how, it's been a long time, but somehow, a parish group from Brooklyn (not the one up near the Iowa border but the "real" one, in New York), invited us to join them for their Midnight Mass at the Milk Grotto Church. Of course, we said yes immediately, while still grinding our teeth over the loss of the big church, with all the lights, and the incense, and the music.

The Milk Grotto is in one of the countless caves that are a feature of the Bethlehem area; many are still used by shepherds today. Legend says that this particular grotto was where the Holy Family hid from Herod's soldiers before they could flee to Egypt. While nursing the child, some of Mary's milk spilled, turning the stone white.

Really? A cave? Well, at least we could go to Midnight Mass together ... almost. The Milk Grotto has an odd configuration, with three spaces radiating out from a central point where the altar was. Everyone could see the altar, but we couldn't all see each other. I will confess that my inner Scrooge had nearly reached full "bah, humbug" stage.

The liturgy proceeded with the familiar readings and prayers in what was, to us, an exotic "eastern" Brooklyn accent. The communion ended, and we all knelt quietly in the semi-darkness. It was fine, but it was just SOOO not what we'd looked forward to, or what we'd planned.

Then, out of the darkness, one of my sopranos began to sing those achingly beautiful words of Christina Rossetti,

In the bleak mid-winter  
Frosty wind made moan,  
Earth stood hard as iron,  
Water like a stone;  
Snow had fallen, snow on snow,  
Snow on snow,  
In the bleak mid-winter  
Long ago.

From their places, the rest of the choir joined in, first humming, then with the words. Even without a conductor, they sang sublimely, and the Milk Grotto was filled with the light of their singing.

Since that wondrous Christmas in Bethlehem forty years ago, life in the Holy Land has changed drastically. Bethlehem, of course, is not simply a place we think about at Christmas, with an adorable child surrounded by angels and shepherds and

well-behaved animals. Bethlehem is a place where actual people try to live actual lives in the midst of unimaginable stress.

The wall that snakes through the Israeli-occupied West Bank along the Green Line, the pressures that led up to the horrific October 7 attacks and the war on Gaza that followed, the ongoing growth of settlements in the West Bank, and a surge of Israeli extremist settler attacks on Palestinian communities have made life grim, especially for Palestinian Christians.

So, I was glad to see an article in Monday's New York Times that, "Christmas is back in Bethlehem." A marching band played carols, a choir sang hymns and the lights adorning a giant evergreen blinked on, as Christmas tentatively returned to Bethlehem's Manger Square. Commenting on this small bright spot in an otherwise somber moment, Bethlehem's mayor, Maher Canawati, said the recent Christmas event was both a celebration and a statement of hope. "We want peace, we want life."

Maybe I'm being naïve, but when I read the article, my heart leapt a little, and words that we will hear on Sunday echoed in my head: *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it* (John 1:5).

On that Christmas night of 1985, the Milk Grotto continued to glow long after the singing had faded, because, even in the darkness of disappointment, and out of the silence, without any "stuff" but what was in their hearts, my students showed us just how silently and insistently God continues to impart the blessings of heaven to our hearts. It was not the Christmas we had planned, but it is *the* Christmas that I will always remember in my heart.

I leave you with Christina Rossetti's final stanza that poses what could be our question today, and every day.

What can I give Him,  
Poor as I am? —  
If I were a Shepherd  
I would bring a lamb;  
If I were a Wise Man  
I would do my part, —  
Yet what I can I give Him, —  
Give my heart.

*And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us...full of grace and truth.*

Merry Christmas to you all. Amen.