

*"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.*

*Bishop's Christmas Message 2018*

Dear Friends of the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin,



I'm writing this the day after I get home from my first ever trip to the Holy Land. My husband Randy and I decided that after three decades as pastors we should make a pilgrimage to all the places we've been preaching about for so many years. I was excited to see Bethlehem, Jerusalem, the Sea of Galilee, Capernaum, the Garden of Gethsemane, the Temple Wall, and Athens, Corinth and Rome and all the other landmarks of our Spiritual Geography. I was especially excited to see Bethlehem.

While I was in Bethlehem, I heard Pastor Lori Ruge-Jones, a gifted story teller recite from heart, Luke 2, the Christmas story. We were in a beautiful chapel on the site where according to tradition; the angels announced to the Shepherds the good news of Jesus' birth. Imagine these familiar words, spoken from the heart, echoing off the stones of the Shepherd's Field chapel.

*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."*

The group of pilgrims I was with sat in silence for a few moments before we sang Christmas carols: *O Little Town of Bethlehem, Angels we have heard on High, Hark the Herald Angels Sing, Silent Night, Away in the Manger...* It was a holy moment and highlight of our trip to the Holy Land. It was simple, beautiful, goose bump, Hallmark Card moment....

BUT the undercurrent of that moment is more complicated. As tourists we were well aware that Bethlehem in 2018 is a city controlled by the Palestinians and the surrounding area is controlled by Israel. It is a land that has been fought over throughout known history by those who considered it Holy; Jews, Muslims and Christians. It is a place that builds walls to separate, and struggles with daily violence and conflict.

The Shepherds of first century were well aware that Bethlehem was under foreign occupation by Rome. The Roman Caesar, Augustus sent out a decree that Jews were to be enrolled in their hometown to be taxed. There were uprisings and revolts against Roman rule of the Jews. It was and is complicated and there is no quick fix.

But all of that is far away or long ago. How about the here and now? Is your life like a beautiful peaceful Hallmark card wishing season's greetings or is your life more complicated like a major geopolitical conflict? Or is it somewhere in between? Regardless, there is one thing that is true, in the midst of it all God put on flesh and came down to us, to live among us. In the midst of it all, Jesus was born.

*Rev Lauri Shaefer*