

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
 21 December, 2014 ~ Lessons and Carols

Every Day, the Glory is Ready to Emerge from its Debasement

“Jesus was born in a stable.” Italian author Giovanni Papini is speaking. “[A] real stable, not the bright, airy portico [that] Christian painters have created, ... as if ashamed that their god should have lain down in poverty and dirt. And not the modern Christmas Eve ‘holy stable’ either, made of plaster of Paris, with little candy-like statuettes; the holy stable, clean and prettily painted, with a neat, tidy manger, an ecstatic [donkey], a contrite ox, and angels fluttering ... on the roof...”

“A real stable,” continues Giovanni Papini, “is dark, reeking....” Jesus was born in one of the filthiest places in the world.¹

Two thousand years later, American author Annie Dillard visited the site of that stable.² Here is her reflection:

“... The Greek Orthodox Church owns the grotto site [in Bethlehem] now.... There, in the Church of the Nativity, I took worn stone stairways to descend to levels of dark rooms, chapels, and dungeon-like corridors.... Dense brocades hung down old stone walls. [Smoky] oil lamps hung in layers....

“... I passed several monks, narrow men, ... who wore tall black hats and long black robes. Ethiopians, they use the oldest Christian rite. At a lower level, in a small room, I peered over half a stone wall and saw Europeans below; they whispered in a language I could not identify.

¹ Giovanni Papini, “Ox and Ass,” Dec. 26, *Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas*

² Annie Dillard, “Bethlehem,” Dec. 23, *Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas* She describes the alleged site of the stable as “one of the queerest spots on earth ... I hope.”

“Distant music sounded deep, as if from within my ribs. The music was, in fact, people from all over the world in the upper chamber, singing harmonies in their various tongues. The music threaded the vaults.

“Now I climbed down innumerable dark stone stairs ... down yet another smoky stairway, [to] the back of a stone cave far beneath street level. This was the place, ... the deepest basement....

“It was a narrow cave, about ten feet wide, [smelling of wet sand]; cracked marble paved it. Bunched tapers, bending grotesque[ly] in the heat, lighted a corner of the floor.... People had to kneel, one by one, ... to see it: [The Grotto of the Nativity]....

“A fourteen-pointed silver star, two feet in diameter, covered a raised bit of marble floor at the cave wall.... In the center of the ... star was a circular hole. That was the bull’s eye, G*d’s quondam target; ... here, just here, the [child was] born....

“Actually, many ... scholars think Jesus of Nazareth was ... born in Nazareth; [the story of] his birth [in] Bethlehem [was to fulfill] a prophesy.... [Nonetheless,] crouching people leaned forward to wipe their fingers across the hole’s flat bottom. When it was my turn, I knelt, bent under a fringed satin drape, reached across half the silver star, and touched ... [the] hole... [It was] a quarter inch deep and six inches across, like a wide petri dish.”

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Annie Dillard concludes,

“Any patch of ground anywhere smacks more of G*d’s presence on earth ... than [does] this marble grotto....

“The ugliness, ... the pomp ... some human’s idea of elegance ... G*d [puts] up with [this grand comedy]....

“And why ... not? ... Things here on earth get a whole lot worse than bad taste.... [And] I have never read any theologian that claims that G*d is particularly interested in religion, anyway....”³

³ Annie Dillard, *op cit*

Beloved spiritual companions, Jesus was born in a real stable. Apparently, the grotto is not much of an improvement. But as Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav reminded us, “Everyday, the glory is ready to emerge from its debasement.”

That's up to us.

Here's the whole sermon:

“Everyday, the glory is ready to emerge from its debasement.”

That's up to us!

Let every heart prepare!