

Silent Night, Holy Night
Christmas Eve, 2005 Christ Church Cathedral, Lexington
The Rt. Rev. Stacy F. Sauls

It is almost 15 years ago that I visited Bethlehem for the first time. I had looked forward to going to the Holy Land in much the same way as I would look forward to going to Europe. I expected to see interesting things. What I did not expect was to encounter God. One of those places I visited, of course, was at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. It is one of the oldest churches in continuous use in the world, perhaps the very oldest. It was founded by St. Helena, the mother of the Emperor Constantine in the fourth century. And it is still there. The original walls are in place, although you can see where the Crusaders added frescoes to the walls. The original mosaic floor is still there, almost perfectly preserved. The door has been modified. During a period of Muslim occupation, the Muslim authorities altered the door so that you have to bend over somewhat awkwardly to get in and especially to get out, to stop people from hauling out the church's treasures. The focal point of the church is the place where the event we celebrate tonight is said to have taken place. Now, I know that may sound a little bit like "George Washington slept here," but the truth is that the archaeological case for the Church of the Nativity is quite strong. St. Helena did not go around just making things up. She actually did her homework. Underneath the main level of the Church of the Nativity is the site of Jesus' birth, the stable we read about on this holy night. To get to it, you have to go down a fairly steep and slightly winding staircase. The staircase itself is worth the trip. Along the way down are thousands and thousands of crosses carved into the stone, each one by a pilgrim who has visited this holy site before. It gives you an overwhelming sense of taking your place in the company of saints. And when you get to the bottom, you find yourself in a cave. It is small and cramped. It is not the wooden structure we associate with European paintings of the event and the Nativity sets we put up in our homes at this time of year. It is a stable of ancient Judea, a land where wood was scarce, but the kind that would have been prevalent in the rocky and slightly hilly terrain around Bethlehem. Along one wall is the Greek Orthodox shrine marking the spot of the birth. You can bend down and touch the original cave floor at that point. Along another wall is the Roman Catholic altar marking the spot where the manger stood. Now that, I'm sure, is a practical accommodation to the difficulties of sharing. But as to the little cave as a whole, all I can tell you is that there is something quite holy about it. It is one of the places in the Holy Land where I had an overpowering sense of the presence of God. After standing in the grotto of the Lord's birth for awhile, I went back up to the main part of the church and finished looking around. Before I left, though, I knew I wanted to go back to the cave and pray alone, to allow myself to be surrounded by the holy presence of God. So before my group left, and after I knew all of them had passed through the grotto, I went back. I went down the same stairs and sure enough, when I got to the cave, it was empty. I was there alone. I stood at the back and took in the scene and let my mind go back to that night so long ago when the cave stable was full of animals and Mary and Joseph and the Child and the shepherds. I couldn't

have been there more than two or three minutes when I could hear others coming down the stairs, not just a few, but a busload. It was a busload of Korean tourists. I did not think of them as pilgrims but as tourists because they all had on hats and tee shirts alike and cameras around their necks and they talked constantly and loudly without any reverence at all. I was highly annoyed and had some most uncharitable thoughts. But I decided to wait them out, figuring that they could not possibly be moved to linger by any spiritual inclination. I hoped they would flash their pictures and move on. Then they gathered and focused their attention. And they started to sing. I do not speak Korean, but I did not need to understand the words. "Silent night, holy night. All is calm, all is bright. Round yon Virgin, mother and child, holy infant so tender and mild, sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace." I was brought up short in my annoyance and spiritual smugness. And it is only then that I really encountered God, my feelings of the profound nearness of God before notwithstanding. In the busload of Koreans, God had stopped being near and had become flesh. Since that first Christmas Eve over two thousand years ago, God has been more than an idea or a feeling or a distant reality or an occasional participant in the history of the world. Since Christmas, God has become flesh. For me, on that visit to the Church of the Nativity, God was indeed present, but not exactly as I expected. What I expected is the sense of the presence of God in the solitude of a place where I'm convinced Jesus once was physically present. What I got instead was the actual presence of God in the persons of a busload full of Koreans singing Silent Night. And in that I got more than I bargained for. I understood the significance of Christmas, what has changed about the world in Christmas, and why we cannot just go on living our lives as if nothing is different. God is no longer safely distant. God is present in the flesh, in the living flesh of human beings—Koreans, Americans, Mexicans, a swarthy infant of the Middle East born to parents on the run, black people, white people, native people, European people, gay people, and straight people. The thing that is totally changed in the event of Christmas is that we are no longer able to keep God at a safe distance. God is uncomfortably present in the flesh all around us. In Christmas we cannot come to terms with the God of heaven without coming to terms with the God incarnate. We cannot love God, who is unseen, if we do not love our neighbors who are seen, even when our neighbors and our brothers and sisters and our parents and our children infringe somewhat on the way we think things ought to be. Indeed, it is especially when they infringe on the way we think things ought to be that their lives offer us a way to encounter God because it is then that they are most distinct from us, most other from us, and God is ultimately other than us. Ironically, sometimes it is especially difficult to encounter others as other at Christmas because we have so many preconceived ideas of how things ought to be at this time of year. The tree is supposed to look a certain way, the way it always has. The Christmas dinner is supposed to be a certain way, the way grandmother used to make it. People are supposed to behave a certain way, the way they would in our projections of how everything should go when perfect families gather. There are, of course, no perfect families. The most we can hope for is real ones. All those things, of course, all of those preconceived ideas and expectations are nothing more than ideas, figments of our imaginations. They are perhaps senses of what Christmas should be but they are

not actually Christmas. The flesh and blood reality is what is really Christmas, and we should not confuse our idea of Christmas with the reality of the incarnate Christmas, with the reality of the lived out truth of Christmas in each other. What changed forever in the birth of God through Mary is that God has miraculously traded the way of distance for the way of nearness, the way of the perfect for the way of the imperfect, the way of the immortal for the way of the mortal, the way it should be for the way it is. What has happened in Christmas is that the distinction between what is flesh and what is spirit has been done away with. In Christmas, they have become one. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The truth of Christmas is that God is not less present when the grotto is filled with yakety tourists from Korea. God is more present. God is not less present when others don't quite live up to our expectations of them. God is more present. It is so because our expectations are our creations. Our neighbors, our brothers and sisters, our families, our friends, and indeed even our enemies—in the flesh—are God's. And God's purpose in that creation is that we encounter the Holy Child of Bethlehem, nothing less. Amen. The Rt. Rev. Stacy F. Sauls, Bishop of Lexington