

# Christmas Eve Meditation

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell

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I've been to three Bethlehems in my life. The first Bethlehem is in Eastern Pennsylvania where the Moravians settled nearly 300 years ago and named their settlement after the birthplace of Christ. Christmas shops are in abundance and even today the great Moravian Star hovers over the city to remind all who pass through of the story of Jesus' birth. The second Bethlehem I've been to is about an eleven hour flight east from here to a part of the world that is no stranger to war and violence. To get to this Bethlehem you must pass through the security wall that divides Israel from the West Bank into Palestinian territory – where the Palestinian town of Bethlehem lies just a half dozen miles from Jerusalem. In this Bethlehem I've been to the Church of the Nativity and to the site where tradition tells us Christ was born. I've been to the shepherds' fields where the Bethlehem shepherds heard the angels sing their heavenly song. I've been to Manger Square and seen more machine guns than I've seen mangers. That is Bethlehem number two. The third Bethlehem I visited serendipitously several years ago. This Bethlehem turned out to be in Central

America. I was in the country of Honduras, no stranger itself to crime and violence and I was in the western part of the country in the district of Copan visiting the mission of my previous congregation in the town of LaEntrada, Honduras. And one day while we were there I accompanied a medical brigade of nurses and doctors and made our way through some of the barrios visiting some homes checking on health needs. None of the homes we visited that day were any bigger than the bedrooms in which you and I sleep. During our visits we were met by the gracious hospitality of the Honduran people.

Now there is one home that will remain etched indelibly in my mind. Again, it was a house, or should I say a hut, no bigger than 15 feet by 20 feet. In this home lived seven people. The mother of the family was happy to greet us. We met some of her children including her oldest son who looked to be no older than 11 who had just returned from his job of gathering large sticks for sale and for burning. A bushel of them, heavier than I would choose to carry, were strapped to his back. After speaking with this mother and her children for a while we were invited in to see their home. We walked inside this dark little hut and saw on one side one bed that slept half the family and on the other side the other bed that slept the other half. Both beds were simple frames of wood over which had been stretched strings of twine that supported a layer of rags. Dirty rags. Beds of dirty rags and twine. There was a wood

burning makeshift stove with no ventilation to the outside. Beyond the beds and the stove there was little room for anything else. After looking for a moment at this family's house and turning to leave I noticed out of the corner of my eye something, due to the darkness, I hadn't noticed ... something on one of the beds. I stepped aside to look more closely. And on this bed of rags and twine there laid a two-month-old baby, asleep. Sound asleep. My recognition of the child startled me. This little two-month-old child lying in a place where none of us would choose to lay our own child. And then it dawned on me. This is what the shepherds saw. A babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying where none of us would choose to lay our own child. I was in Bethlehem. Though I had seen the child in the manger depicted a thousand times --- I had never seen it like this. In the flesh. So very real. And then it dawned on me a second thought: This is the length to which God has gone. From the royal chambers of the highest heaven ... to a place where none of us would lay our own child. To a bed of straw ... to a bed of rags

and twine. And then it dawned on me a third thought: If God would go here then God will go anywhere. If there is one thing that Bethlehem tells us is that when it comes to you and me when it comes to every man, woman and child --- there is no place that God won't go.

Frederick Buechner put it this way: "Once (we've) seen Him in a stable, (we) can never be sure where He will appear or to what lengths He will go, to what ludicrous depths of self-humiliation He will descend in His wild pursuit of mankind."

The psalmist put it another way: "If I ascend to heaven you are there; if I make my bed in (hell) you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there you hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast."

Oh yes, if God can go to the Bethlehem manger -- if this is where God chooses to begin his earthly sojourn --- well then God will go anywhere.

At the Nuremberg War Trials one of the witnesses told the story of how he had

**“God has every intention, every power, every ounce of love to meet us right where we are.”**

escaped one of the Nazi death camps as well as one of the gas chambers. And for a while survived by living in an open grave in a Jewish cemetery in Vilna, Poland. While he was there, he saw a young woman give birth to a child in a nearby grave. In her delivery she was assisted by an eighty-year-old gravedigger. When the baby uttered its first cry, the old man prayed, "Great God, hast thou finally sent us the Messiah? For who but the Messiah could be born in a grave?"

Oh how true! And what great news for you and me! That this love of God has no limits. Born in a manger, but born again in a tomb --- to show us what? That no matter where life might lead us --- God has every intention, every power, every ounce of love to meet us right where we are.

I don't know where Christmas Eve 2016 finds you. You may be on top of the world or you may feel you are at the bottom of the heap. You may feel like all systems are go or you may feel like you can't even turn the key. You may feel like you are buried in abundance or left exposed by scarcity. You may have risen only to fall or you may have fallen only to rise. You may be so confused you don't know where you are. And who of us has any idea what tomorrow will bring. But wherever you are this night and wherever you will be tomorrow I can promise you this: you are still well within the reach of God. For a God who shows up in a stable, will show up anywhere. Even in your life and even in mine.

O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie,  
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by.  
Yet in thy dark streets shineth, the everlasting light.  
The hope and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

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*Dr. Stephen D. McConnell*  
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Church of the Palms

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3224 Bee Ridge Rd, Sarasota FL 34239 • (941) 924-1323