



Advent 2009

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

The dawn from on high will break upon us ... to guide us in the way of peace (Luke 1:78-79).

Earlier this fall, I traveled to the Middle East. The trip included a stop in Bethlehem, where I had the opportunity to visit an ancient cave that is similar to what a cave stable might have looked like when Joseph and Mary arrived over 2000 years ago.

The cave stable was small, cool, very quiet, and peaceful. It was not hard to imagine the space being used as a birthing place for a child.

While there, I thought about how that quiet, peaceful spot is located in a wider region that is marked with ongoing violence and tension. I thought about other areas in the world where people's lives are uprooted by such things as famine and warfare, and I wondered about the quiet places one might find there.

I reflected on how, closer to home, we have seen our own level of tension heightened this year because of an economic crisis, rising unemployment, mass shootings, a flu epidemic, ongoing deployment of troops, and so much more. I have heard about and seen firsthand how difficult these stressors have been on our congregations across the denomination. Mission giving, programs, building plans, and staff have been reduced in an effort to make ends meet.

It has been a difficult year. Yet, a quiet, confident strength has been present across the church from which amazing things have happened.

I have heard stories of compassion, generosity, and hope during these tough times. Food pantries, shelters, health clinics, employment training, and countless other creative approaches have been taken to help meet the needs of neighbors and strangers alike.

During the Advent and Christmas seasons, I am reminded anew of the importance of the peaceful birth of Jesus in that quiet cave stable in Bethlehem so long ago. The circumstances surrounding his birth didn't stay peaceful for long, but the very presence of the Christ child was anchored completely in God's redeeming love and hope for the entire world.

From that quiet beginning came the Word-made-flesh, breaking upon us to guide us in the way of peace. May it be so again this year – for each of you, for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), for the church worldwide, and for this very world itself.

The peace of the Christ child be with you.

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