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In 2009 I visited Bethlehem in the Holy Land.

I remember bending over, as everyone must, to pass under the tiny doorway that takes you into the Church of the Nativity. I remember standing in Manger Square with hundreds of pilgrims from around the world.

I remember waiting in a long line of people wanting to kneel and pray in the grotto over the very place where it is believed Mary gave birth to Jesus, the Son of God. The closer I was drawn to this incredible moment, the more my heart pounded and my eyes welled up. Knowing my time there would be so very brief, I wondered how I would pray. I really did not know, but as I knelt down and closed my eyes, these words came to mind,

"Love divine all loves excelling,

joy of heaven to earth come down,

fix in us thy humble dwelling;

all thy faithful mercies crown.

I felt others pressing in behind me. I got up, a bit weak in my legs, and made my way back up to the church where Armenians were singing a mass.

From the church we made our way to Shepherds Fields. As I roamed around the scrubby landscape, I imagined that night sky of so long ago alive with the song of the angels announcing the birth of the Saviour. As we got ready for the short trek the shepherds would have made looking for the manger where the Christ Child could be found, I picked up a few pieces of stone. I place them in the crèche we set up at home every Christmas.

On Christmas Eve I will be thinking of Bishop Suheil of Jerusalem and the entire ecumenical delegation gathering in Manger Square for The Proclaiming of The Nativity of our Lord, and prayers for peace and goodwill among the nations.

This is the only Bethlehem where Christ was born in the flesh.

There are in fact many Bethlehems where he is born in the heart. We are reminded of this in an amazing piece of poetry by John Terpstra in the December edition of the Anglican

Living the Marks of Mission

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Journal. The poem speaks of many "Bethlehems" across Canada and truly there are many more all around the world. In every one we are united in prayer as we sing this holy night.

"O Holy child of Bethlehem,

Descend to us we pray;

Cast out our sin and enter in;

Be born in us today.

We hear the Christmas angels

O come to us, abide with us,

Our Lord Emmanuel."

May the blessings of his love and peace be yours this Christmastide.

+Fred