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LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM NEVER LIES TOO STILL

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I didn't know what to expect as our bus started on the road from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. The wise men who some biblical scholars believe were astrologers probably walked or rode on camels on the same six-mile path.

The shepherd fields outside my passenger window are still fertile with silky green grass on the billowy slopes.

Within minutes, the scenery changes to guns and tourists. Israeli and Palestinian soldiers stare one another down at the heavily guarded tomb of Jacob's wife, Rachel (Genesis 35:19). The mother of Joseph and Benjamin is buried just outside Bethlehem.

My anticipation of quiet reverence is shattered as we stop across from the Church of the Nativity. Horns are honking, motorbikes are buzzing, everyone is in a hurry.

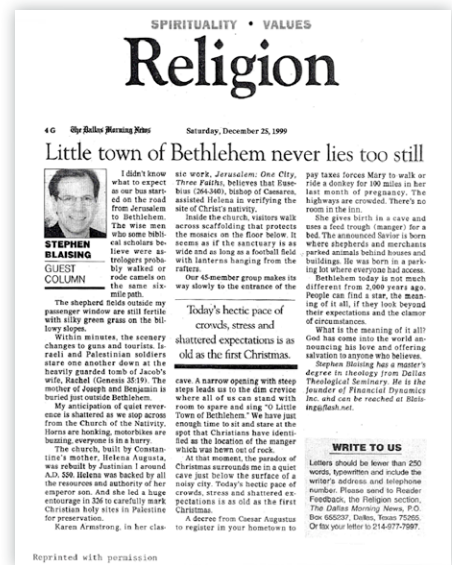
The church, originally built by Constantine's mother, Helena Augusta, was rebuilt by Justinian I around A.D. 550. Helena was backed by all the resources and authority of her emperor son. And she led a huge entourage in 326 to carefully mark Christian holy sites in Palestine for preservation.

Karen Armstrong, in her classic work, *Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths*, believes that Eusebius (264-340), bishop of Caesarea, assisted Helena in verifying the site of Christ's nativity.

Inside the church, visitors walk across the scaffolding that protects the mosaics on the floor below. It seems as if the sanctuary is as wide and long as a football field with lanterns hanging from the rafters.

Our 45-member group makes its way slowly to the entrance of the cave. A narrow opening with steep steps leads us to the dim crevice where all of us can stand with room to spare and sing "O Little Town of Bethlehem." We have just enough time to sit and stare at the spot where Christians have identified as the location of the manger which was hewn out of rock.

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At that moment, the paradox of Christmas surrounds me in a quiet cave just below the surface of a noisy city. Today's hectic pace of crowds, stress and shattered expectations is as old as the first Christmas.

A decree from Caesar Augustus to register everyone in their hometown forces Mary to walk or ride a donkey for 100 miles in her last month of pregnancy. The highways are crowded. There's no room in the inn.

She gives birth in a cave and uses a feed trough (manger) for a bed. The announced Savior is born where shepherds and merchants parked animals behind houses and buildings. He was born in a parking lot where everyone had access.

Bethlehem today is not much different from 2,000 years ago. People can find a star, the meaning of it all, if they look beyond their expectations and the clamor of circumstances.

What is the meaning of it all? God has come into the world announcing his love and offering salvation to anyone who believes.

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