

December 24 and 25, Nativity A (Luke 2:1–14 (15-20))

It's likely that Jesus was born in a cave. Does that make any difference?

by [Roger Nelson](#) in the [December 2025](#) issue

Published on December 18, 2025

Maybe it's all those crèches on front lawns, or maybe it's due to illustrated children's Bibles, but I always pictured Mary and Joseph arriving at an inn late at night: the sky inky black, the stars twinkly, and the only light a flickering oil lamp. In my imagination the inn is a square adobe structure with a couple windows and a thatched roof.

Joseph sheepishly knocks on the wood door as Mary eases herself down off the donkey. The innkeeper comes to the door in a robe, with his tousled hair stuffed up into a nightcap. He wants to help, but he looks over his shoulder and, with a shake of his head and a shrug, confirms that he just doesn't have any spare rooms.

Joseph looks down at his dusty sandals. His shoulders slump. There's a chill in the air. And he's just about to muster up the courage to plead when the innkeeper brightens with an idea. *You could go out back to the stable. You could build a little fire. The hay is dry and you could sleep on that. It'd be better than trying to travel more—given her condition.* And Jesus is born in a barn of warm, worn woods, soft light, and gently lowing cows.

However, while in Israel I noticed that everything around seemed to be white, sunbaked, broken, hardscrabble stone. Big boulders and chipped pebbles. Rock-faced cliffs and stone caves. There's tillable soil, but mostly everything is rock.

In Bethlehem, a Palestinian woman told us that chances are Mary and Joseph showed up at a cave with a structure toward the front where the family ate, slept, and lived, but toward the back of the cave there was a place where the animals were kept—with stone mangers and stone troughs.

Bethlehem is in the hills of the West Bank, where there's a sort of geological logic to Jesus being born in a stone cave. And the word translated as "inn" can be better translated as "lodging place." Meaning it's the place where the people sleep.

And given that the front of the cave was probably already full of folks who were in town for the census, Joseph and Mary were probably offered the space in the back where the animals were kept at night. Jesus was probably born in a cave dwelling built into the side of a West Bank hill, with animals being sheltered from night predators.

I guess how it happened doesn't really make a big difference. But it does serve as a reminder that God in Christ is born in a particular place, at a particular time, with the particular idiosyncrasies that make things particular.

As Torey Lightcap—dean of Grace Episcopal Cathedral in Topeka, Kansas—put it in a sermon:

It is, in one sense, a very great scandal that God should choose a little boy—a baby—in some cave somewhere in which to be seen. In a time and in a place to which we can point on a map or a calendar. It's as outrageous as it is sublime. The stink and spittle of animals, the blood of birth, dirt floors, uncertainty, terrible humility.

It's as outrageous as it is sublime. There's a mystery here beyond imagination and fairy tale. God as Jesus with the DNA of Mary; God as Jesus with the DNA of the Holy Spirit. The breath of divinity coughed out of the lungs of a newborn with a tiny little bottom wrapped in cloth, in the back of a cave. God as flesh on stone.

Tradition places the Church of the Nativity atop the site where Jesus was born. Down a skinny set of stairs, in a cramped basement grotto, you stoop down to see a 14-pointed silver star set into a marble floor, surrounded by silver lamps where, according to tradition, Jesus was born. Then you're nudged forward to another altar marking the site where Mary laid the newborn baby in the manger. The Orthodox Church manages the birth altar; the Catholic Church manages the manger altar.

For almost 2,000 years Christians have come to this site believing in and looking for evidence of the Divine. When I was there, it was standing room only as Asians and Ethiopians, Eastern Europeans and Southern Baptists, Brits and Hispanics, Catholics and Pentecostals were all wedged together in the basement hallway, with cameras in hand, hoping to get some sense, some feeling, some hint that God had been there.

Part of the wonder of Christmas is that we gather not just for an idea, creed, or confession, not just for music and family traditions, however beautiful. We gather together because in a particular place, at a particular time, God became mass and matter, took on cells and cellulose. We gather in the mystery that God slipped in among us. It's a mystery that is told in tradition, imagination, and deep longing.